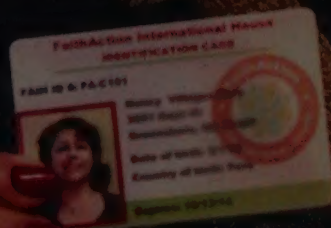


THE Christian CENTURY

Thinking Critically, Living Faithfully

Names with faces

An ID card turns strangers into neighbors



The Christian century

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The *Christian Century* welcomes its new publisher, Peter W. Marty

Peter W. Marty is senior pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church, a 3,500-member congregation in Davenport, Iowa.

The author of numerous articles on leadership, preaching, and parish renewal, Marty is also author of *The Anatomy of Grace*. From 2004 to 2009, he served as host of the national radio broadcast *Grace Matters*. In 2010, the Academy of Parish Clergy named him “Parish Pastor of the Year,” recognizing leadership excellence and faithfulness in congregational development. For more on Peter Marty’s appointment, see p. 10.

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January 20, 2016 Vol. 133, No. 2

IN THIS Issue

6 Letters

Visions of renewal

7 The same God?

The Editors: What Muslims and Christians do and don't share

8 CenturyMarks

Welcoming Syrians, postponing theological judgment, etc.

10 An announcement

Peter W. Marty named CENTURY publisher

11 The weave

Brian Doyle: A highlight of church league basketball

22 Names with faces

Lee Hull Moses: An ID card turns strangers into neighbors

28 Las bandas niños

Jesse James DeConto: A Latino church empowers young musicians

32 Biblical farce

Debbie Blue: The book of Esther laughs at empire

Cover photo by Todd Drake [the-equalist.com]

NEWS

- 12** American Muslims work to counter backlash; Professor suspended for saying Christians, Muslims 'worship the same God'; Kenyan Muslims protect Christian fellow passengers when militants attack bus; Politics threaten plans for historic gathering of Orthodox churches

IN REVIEW

- 36 Books**
Walter Brueggemann: *Not in God's Name*, by Jonathan Sacks
Karen-Marie Yust: *The Hungry Mind*, by Susan Engel
Dennis O'Brien: *After We Die*, by Stephen T. Davis
- 43 Media**
Jason Byassee: Redeeming *Star Wars*
- 47 Art**
Lil Copan: Judson Arts Wednesdays at Judson Memorial Church, New York City

COLUMNS

- 18-21 Living by the Word**
Verity A. Jones
- 35 Faith Matters**
Stephanie Paulsell: Fluent in God's work
- 45 Notes from the Global Church**
Philip Jenkins: The saint of Karachi

POETRY

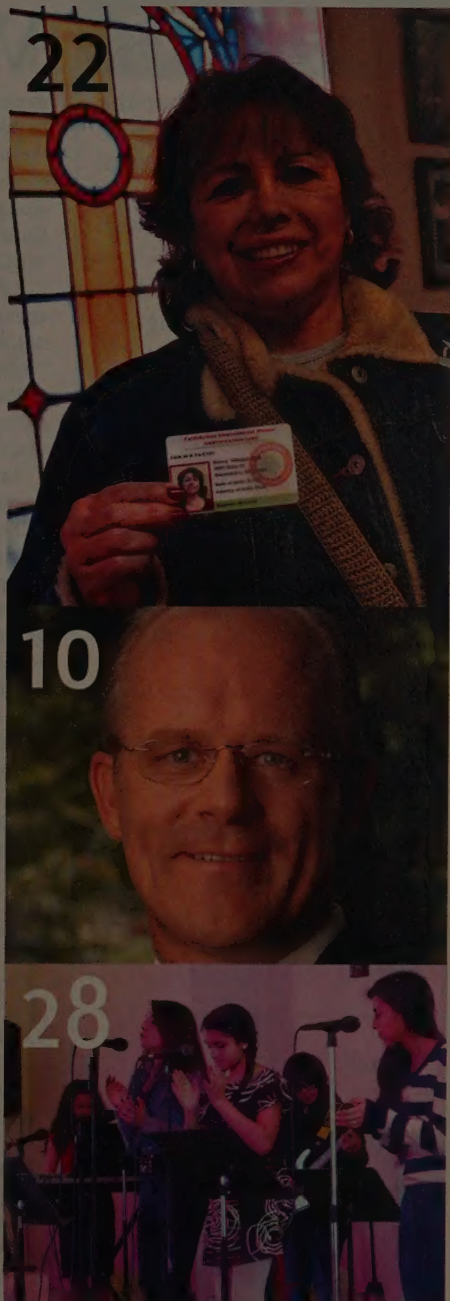
- 26 Donna Pucciani:** The discipline of gratitude

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EDITORIAL OFFICE: General queries to main@christiancentury.org; 312-263-7510. Letters to the editor: letters@christiancentury.org or the CHRISTIAN CENTURY, Attn: Letters to the Editor, 104 S. Michigan Ave., Suite 1100, Chicago, IL 60603. For information on rights & permissions, submissions guidelines, advertising information, letters to the editor: christiancentury.org/contact.

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The CHRISTIAN CENTURY (ISSN 0009-5281) is published biweekly at 104 S. Michigan Ave., Suite 1100, Chicago IL 60603. Periodicals postage paid at Chicago, IL, and additional mailing offices. Canada Post Publications Mail Product (Canadian Distribution) Sales Agreement No. 1406523. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to CHRISTIAN CENTURY, P.O. Box 429, Congers, NY 10920-0429.



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LETTERS

Visions of renewal

What Carol Howard Merritt describes as being “knee-deep in renewal” (Dec. 9) sounds more like the reinvention of the church. In blessing Diane Butler Bass’s panentheism, Merritt is moving toward god as some undefined spiritual power that, along with a fully human Jesus, helps Christians in some indirect way make the world a better place.

Of course the church needs to be engaged in the world. But Christians are not, as Derrick Weston is quoted as saying, “accidental conspirators”; we are a people called by God to witness to his grace and mercy. We get the power and tools to do that through encountering the triune God.

Like so many others today, Merritt assumes that the purpose of God and our calling is to make the world a better place, so we can all be happy and healthy and live peacefully. Such teaching makes God unnecessary, and the church simply a gathering of like-minded individuals. Renewal of the church must start in a new emphasis on the encounter with God in the context of worship where God is Emmanuel and on receiving the power and direction to do the “good works” that Paul says we were created to do.

Eugene Roberts
Plantation, Fla.

Copastors . . .

I found much to admire and commend in Carter Lester’s and Kerry Pidcock-Lester’s account of how they have handled both their copastorate and marriage (“Copastors,” Dec. 23). It sounds very well thought-out and deliberate. I was only saddened by the mention of their shrinking circle of outside friendships. Despite the inevitable time constraints, it is important for pastors to form and maintain friendships and relationships in the neighborhood and wider community.

Sal Sceccitano
Troy, N.Y.

God’s mercy . . .

Arden Mahlberg (Letters, Dec. 23) takes issue with Charles Hefling’s use of the word *mercy* to describe God’s activities (“How wide is God’s mercy?” Nov. 11), but it’s a perfectly appropriate use of the word and an equally perfect description of God.

I am not alone in this assessment. Cardinal Walter Kasper, in his book *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*, writes: “The determination of mercy as the basic attribute of God has consequences for determining the relationship of mercy to God’s justice and omnipotence. If mercy is the fundamental attribute of God, then it cannot be understood as an instance of justice; on the contrary, divine justice must rather be understood from the perspective of divine mercy. Mercy, then, is the justice that is idiosyncratic to God.”

George E. Dunn

St. Andrew United Methodist Church,
Highlands Ranch, Colo.

Humble connections . . .

Nicole Chilivis’s beautiful “Humble connections” (Dec. 23) addresses the conflict all of us feel when we face the question of love versus ideology. I struggle with some of the same issues and have decided that staying in connection with family and friends is the highest value.

Kay Streater

christiancentury.org comment

Regarding “Humble connections,” I was spiritually nurtured in a very fundamentalist environment and then liberalized in seminary. Sometimes the soil in which the seed of faith is planted is not rich enough or deep enough to nurture a vibrant plant. But I remain deeply grateful for those who planted the seed.

Ted Nutting

christiancentury.org comment

January 20, 2016

The same God?

Wheaton College's suspension of associate professor Larycia Hawkins has sparked debate on several fronts (see News story, p. 13). The political scientist attracted attention for wearing a headscarf in solidarity with Muslims. Before this, Hawkins—the first black woman on Wheaton's tenured faculty—had clashed with administrators over questions related to sexuality and black liberation theology.

Perhaps most contentious is the reason the college gave for suspending Hawkins: her claim that Christians and Muslims “worship the same God.” Wheaton suggested that this stance conflicts with the college's statement of faith.

Does it? Wheaton's statement of faith includes the core elements of historic orthodox Christianity along with items more particular to American evangelicalism. It doesn't mention Islam. Is it fair to say that a full-throated affirmation of the Christian God implicitly excludes the God worshiped by Muslims?

One might answer yes with no hostility toward Islam—indeed, out of respect for genuine difference. The Christian God, after all, is irreducibly Trinity. And this God is inseparable from Jesus Christ, who for Christians is not just the prophet revered in Islam but the incarnate Word who was with God and was God in the beginning. Such claims have long been essential to what Christians talk about when we talk about God—and such claims can be bewildering if not blasphemous to Muslims.

On the other hand, one need not be a universalist or even a liberal to affirm that Christians and Muslims worship the same God. Pope Francis says this; so did his predecessor; so do official Roman Catholic documents. In earlier eras, Christian thinkers often assumed a shared monotheistic faith as a starting point for conversation with Muslims. The church tended to see Muslims as heretics—a harsh term, but one reserved for those who say the wrong things about the right God.

As for the Trinity, theologian Miroslav Volf has argued that Islam's insistence on the unity of God doesn't clash with the Trinity itself so much as with misguided conceptions of it. Jews, Christians, and Muslims share a monotheistic heritage, along with several key concepts—such as belief in the one God, the merciful Creator and judge of the world. We even share a common ancestor, one who made a covenant with God. We may believe very different things about Abraham's God, but it's still his God.

The question perhaps boils down to whether the word *God* can be separated from the particular tradition of faith by which God is known. Christian thinkers have made room for both approaches. Whether we end up saying that Christians and Muslims worship different Gods or the same one differently, interfaith work will require both clarity about one's own faith and solidarity with people of other faiths.

One need not be a universalist or even a liberal to affirm that Christians and Muslims worship the same God.

CENTURY marks

DEVIL IN THE DETAILS? In what is called Tri-Faith Initiative, a church, mosque, and synagogue are relocating to a former Jewish country club on the edge of Omaha, Nebraska. When the move is completed, Countryside United Church of Christ, Temple Israel, and the American Muslim Institute will share a common campus. Paradoxically, the stream that runs through the campus is called Hell Creek, perhaps suggesting that the devil is in the details (NPR, December 18).

WELCOME MAT: The presidents of three seminaries near the Missouri-Kansas border wrote a letter to governors Sam Brownback of Kansas and Jay Nixon of Missouri asking them to reconsider their restrictive stances on resettling Syrian refugees. Brownback is one of 30 governors who called for a blockade on Syrian immigrants. Nixon said he wouldn't block the Obama

administration from resettling Syrian refugees but asked that they be vetted adequately. Representing Central Baptist Theological Seminary, Nazarene Theological Seminary, and St. Paul's School of Theology, the three presidents pointed out that churches in the area have a history of resettling refugees and said that they were certain churches would rise to meet the challenge again (Baptist News Global).

JUDGMENT POSTPONED: The medieval concept of *irja* could be an antidote to Islamic extremism. The word literally means "postponing," and was used by some Muslim thinkers during the first century of Islam. Known as *Murjiha*—the postponers—these scholars argued that the issue of who is a true Muslim should be postponed until the afterlife. Faith is a matter of the heart, something God alone can judge. This notion died out and is now considered a

heresy among orthodox Sunnis. Muslims who are not willing to kill apostates are viewed by ISIS leaders as guilty of this heresy (*New York Times*, December 21).

SECURE SANCTUARIES: Houses of worship are thinking about security in new ways in response to mass shootings and extremism. St. Matthew Roman Catholic Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, which draws about 30,000 to weekend masses, warned parishioners last month about the presence of uniformed and plainclothes police, and it announced a ban on backpacks, baby strollers, and diaper bags in worship. The Council on American-Islamic Relations reported that 2015 was the worst year for threats to mosques. The Federal Emergency Management Agency has been holding specialized security training for congregations (AP).

SCARED SILLY: Scientists have concluded that the emotional responses to terrorism are out of proportion to the actual risk. After 9/11 about 30 percent of the population thought they themselves would personally experience terrorism with a year. Women tend to respond to terrorism with fear, men with anger. Anger reduces the ability to respond to perceived threats rationally and leads people to take greater risks in response to perceived threats (NPR, December 22).

TOXIC FOR CHRISTIANS: North Korea may be the most dangerous country in the world for Christians. About a fourth of the country's Christians, who number between 200,000 and 400,000, are thought to be living in forced labor camps because of their refusal to participate in the cult that surrounds the nation's founder, Kim Il-sung. Animosity toward



Christians is so strong that North Koreans with Christian grandparents are denied important jobs. Kim Il-sung's mother, who is the great-grandmother of current leader Kim Jong-un, was a Presbyterian deaconess (*Crux*, December 20).

CURSED: Five of Jesus' disciples came from the town of Bethsaida, north of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus performed some of his greatest miracles there, healing a blind man and feeding thousands. Why then did he rail against Bethsaida? "Woe unto thee, Bethsaida! For the mighty works, which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes" (Matt. 11:21). Archaeologists have discovered a possible explanation: a pagan temple was located there, possibly built by King Herod's son Philip. A Jew himself, Philip may have built the temple to honor the recently deceased mother of the Roman emperor Augustus (*Smithsonian*, January-February).

DONE WITH CHURCH: There are 30 million "dones" in America—people who are finished with the church but not ready to give up their faith in God or their Christian identity, says Josh Packard, a sociologist who recently published *Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People Are DONE with Church but Not Their Faith*. They've not given up on community just because they've walked away from the church. They are looking for new forms of community, places where people can explore their convictions. "We found time and again that people were leaving not because they couldn't find agreement—in fact, many were leaving because they couldn't find disagreement," said Packard (*Christian Science Monitor*, December 19).

ASHES TO ASHES: According to estimates by the funeral industry, 2015 may be the year that the number of cremations surpasses the number of burials in the United States. Lower cost is the reason most often given by people who choose cremation. Flexibility is another: memorial services can be planned for a later time. While most Christian denom-

“To us, the ‘hijab’ is a symbol of an interpretation of Islam we reject that believes that women are a sexual distraction to men, who are weak, and thus must not be tempted by the sight of our hair. We don’t buy it.”

— Asra Q. Nomani and Hala Arafa, two Muslim journalists, who discourage non-Muslims from wearing the hijab out of solidarity with Muslims, arguing that it reinforces a patriarchal interpretation of Islam (*Washington Post*, December 21)

“Syria and the wider Middle East region needs Christians if we are committed to working towards an eventual settlement in which pluralism is respected and different faith communities can thrive. It surely does not serve that goal if we empty the region of Christians now.”

— Miles Windsor, strategist at Middle East Concern, suggesting that Syria will need Christians in the postwar era (*New York Times*, December 19)

inations no longer discourage cremation, it is nonreligious people who are most inclined to choose cremation. In the less religious Oregon, 73 percent choose cremation; in more religious Mississippi, 18 percent do (RNS).

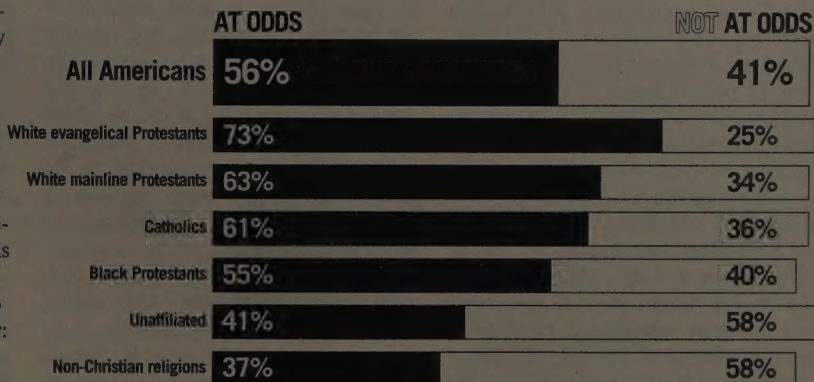
BOMBS AWAY: In a recent poll, 30 percent of Republican primary voters said they would support bombing Agrabah. Agrabah, however, is a fictional country with a Middle Eastern-sounding name (*Guardian*, December 18).

FORCE BE WITH YOU: About 500 people—over twice the usual number—showed up at a *Star Wars*-themed service at the Zion Church in Berlin the weekend the new *Star Wars* movie was released. Some of the congregants carried lightsabers or wore Darth Vader masks. The church organist played the film's theme song. The Protestant pastor said the aim was to show that *Star Wars* draws on religious imagery and “that the Bible and the church are part of our culture” (*Toronto Star*, December 20).

ISLAM & AMERICAN VALUES

SOURCE: 2015 AMERICAN VALUES SURVEY (PRRI)

In 2011 Americans were nearly equally divided: 47 percent agreed, 48 percent disagreed that Islam is at odds with American values. Now a majority of Americans think Islam is at odds with American values.



Totals may not equal 100 percent since some people didn't know or refused to respond to the question.

Peter W. Marty named publisher of the CHRISTIAN CENTURY

Author, radio host, and pastor Peter W. Marty has been named publisher of the CHRISTIAN CENTURY.

"I love the vigorous public witness of the CENTURY that is rooted in the church yet broad in its concern for social, political, and cultural issues of our day," Marty said after the appointment was announced. "Stepping into the publisher's role at this time in life is a way of bringing together multiple passions of mine."

Marty is senior pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church, a 3,500-member congregation in Davenport, Iowa. He will continue to lead that congregation while serving as publisher.

"Peter Marty has great respect for the magazine and its history as well as a

appointment is a very happy development in the long history of the CHRISTIAN CENTURY."

Marty is a frequent speaker at colleges, churches, and conferences across the country. He is the author of numerous articles on leadership, preaching, and parish renewal and the book *The Anatomy of Grace*. From 2004 to 2009 he served as host of the national radio broadcast *Grace Matters*, sponsored by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which reached up to a million listeners weekly.

"I am an avid reader, fueled in part by decades of tracking the CHRISTIAN CENTURY closely," Marty said. "I enjoy development work immensely, especially when the cause is compelling. I'd like

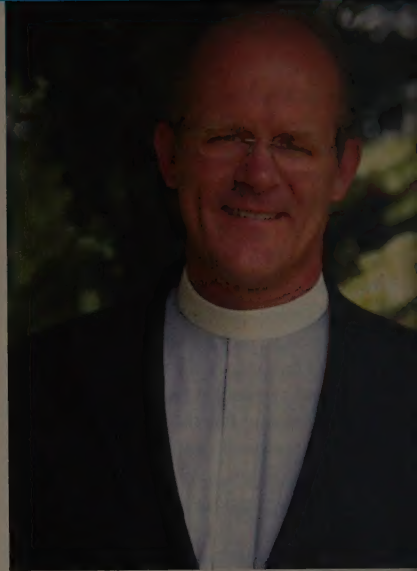
"An extraordinary sense of community exists among CENTURY readers."

sound vision for its future," said Stephen Shorney, vice-president of Hope Publishing, speaking on behalf of the CHRISTIAN CENTURY's board of trustees. "He presented an optimistic plan to face the challenges that all print media are experiencing in the era of digital journalism."

John Buchanan, whom Marty succeeds as publisher, commented, "I cannot imagine a better or more appropriate choice. Peter brings a deep understanding of church and culture, years of leadership and pastoral experience, theological sophistication, and proven administrative skill to his new responsibilities. His

to think I have a good instinct for administrative leadership. And when it comes to helping Christian people discover their distinctive voice in a pluralistic world, I want to be in on the effort. The stakes are too high to let thoughtful religious expression get pushed to the margins by blustery secular voices or by rigid theological minds trumpeting special interests."

Marty noted that he brings to the position "the heart of a pastor" and a continued commitment to that ministry. "Like my wise predecessor, John Buchanan, and so many other pastors, I know the



daily nourishment that comes from dwelling inside a congregation and relish a shaping process of the heart that is unparalleled. Every day ushers in new experiences of God and new insights for the mind. The mix of intellectual, aesthetic, emotional, and deeply human encounters in congregational life is never dull."

"For all my love of parish ministry, however, I dwell in other worlds as well, one of which is writing, and one of which is the academic world."

"John Buchanan" said Marty, "not only brought great insights of faith to the page. He was a courageous leader, and a winsome friend and mentor. He also helped create a new awareness among readers of the challenges of funding a magazine like the CENTURY. By his lead, the CENTURY launched new development efforts, increased donor involvement, and laid the path for a sustainable future."

In 2010 the Academy of Parish Clergy named Marty "Parish Pastor of the Year," recognizing excellence in leadership and faithfulness in congregational development. He has preached in some of America's more notable pulpits, including at Washington National Cathedral, Duke Chapel, and Yale University. He has been the lead columnist for *The Lutheran* magazine. He has been a member of the Louisville Institute's Pastor's Working Group and a partici-

pant in the Duke Project for the Study of Ministry. In 2009, he was named the visiting Hoskins Fellow at Yale Divinity School.

"I have discovered through my travels that a rather extraordinary sense of community exists among CENTURY readers. I witness a palpable enthusiasm whenever

fellow CENTURY readers share conversation about the magazine."

The challenge facing the CENTURY, he said, is to elevate its presence in digital media and develop new expressions of the magazine. "I look for our constituencies to grow in a number of ways. We have young readers to reach, emerging

writers to cultivate, and donors to be reminded of their value to our long-term future."

"Most of all, I intend to do everything in my power to continue fostering the scholarship, civility, and creativity that makes the CENTURY's pages so critical to the spiritual sustenance of readers." **CC**

The weave

BY BRIAN DOYLE

WHEN I WAS a boy the first organized basketball team on which you could play was not a team sponsored by a city parks and recreation league, or a team hosted by a for-profit entity, or a team hand-picked by men who wanted to sell players to powerful high school programs. No: it was our parish's Catholic Youth Organization team, with its golden jerseys trimmed in liturgical green, and its cheerful gang of coaching dads, and its two practices a week, Wednesday nights in one old echoing dusty wooden gymnasium where the floors were so dusty that you could—no kidding—slide easily from the free throw line to the basket, leaving furrows of dust in your wake, and Saturday mornings in a newer gleaming shining burnished wooden gymnasium, where the floors were so meticulously clean and sticky with polish that you would occasionally topple over as your sneakers took root and sent tendrils deep into the strata of the wax.

You had to be in fifth grade before you could try out for the team, and the fifth-grade team had been coached since the Council of Trent by Mr. Torrens, whose idea of offense was the weave, by which the three shortest players among the five on the floor passed to each

other for a long while to no effect, way out beyond the foul line, while the defense rested and read beach books, and the two remaining players on offense caught up on the later work of St. Thomas Aquinas. Our entire first few practices were spent on the weave, until we began to realize slowly that Mr. Torrens did not actually know any other plays, or care much about what we did on the floor, as long as we occasionally ran the weave smartly for him, which we did about once every five minutes, just to perk him up, and because he was the nicest man, always shouting encouragement, though he was not great at names, and called us all Bud.

He was the most courteous cheerful man, though, and he was so immediately and patently happy when we ran the weave that sometimes if we were up a few points we would just run the weave for a while on general principle; I don't think the many thousands of fathers who have coached CYO teams in their parishes since the CYO was invented in 1930 have ever properly been thanked, and I am proud to note here that the members of the St. John Vianney fifth-grade basketball team did their part to thank our coach for his patient service, which was, of course, unremunerated,

except in opportunities to see the weave executed beautifully by kids who had practiced the utterly useless maneuver a thousand times, and knew it all too well.

Usually an essay about a basketball team would proceed right here to talk about victories and losses, and dramatic plays, and entertaining exchanges with referees, and the time one of the dads lost his temper and used such foul and vituperative language to a referee that after the game we huddled and wrote down what he said so that later we could ask our older brothers what it meant, but now I just want to stay with the furrowed dust in the old gym for a moment; and with the parents huddled companionably in the corners of the gym, since there were no chairs or stands or benches for them; and the little brothers and sisters trying hilariously to shoot baskets at halftime, as the referee grins and shoos them off the floor; and the poor dad assigned to be scorekeeper, who is always falling behind and having to ask who scored last, and the poor dad assigned to be timekeeper, who accidentally blew the horn at the wrong time every single game; and the way when we were up by a few points, a rare and lovely event, we would go into the weave without sign or signal, and then glance over at Mr. Torrens, who would slowly sit up straight as he realized what was happening; and his dawning smile, his open genuine heartfelt glee, was a sight I will always remember, a sight I will always relish and savor and enjoy. **CC**

Brian Doyle, editor of Portland magazine, recently wrote the novel Martin Marten.

American Muslims work to counter backlash

Muslim leaders in the United States are mounting a multi-faceted campaign to counter Islamophobia.

The effort comes out of a meeting December 20 in Sterling, Virginia, of about 100 Muslim leaders. The campaign will include efforts to register 1 million additional Muslim voters before the 2016 election, more fully engage young Muslims in mainstream communities, and forge stronger alliances with civil rights and interfaith groups.

The impetus for the gathering was “the unprecedented rise in violent incidents targeting American Muslims in the wake of the Paris terror attacks and the San Bernardino killings and recent inflammatory anti-Muslim rhetoric and political incitement,” said Oussama Jammal, secretary general of the U.S. Council of Muslim Organizations.

Nihad Awad, executive director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, commented on the potential perceptions of the self-described Islamic State.

“ISIS leaders know that they cannot destroy the United States,” Awad said. “What they hope to do is to divide the American people and scare us.”

Hate crimes against Muslim Americans and mosques across the United States have tripled since the terrorist attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, according to a study by the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University, which was first published by the *New York Times*.

Since the November 13 Paris attacks, 38 anti-Muslim attacks have occurred, including violence against hijab-wearing students, death threats at Muslim-owned companies, and arson and vandalism at mosques, the California State University study found. Yet the level of violence

against Muslims is not as high as it was immediately after 9/11, when there were hundreds of attacks against Muslims, according to researchers.

The role of Muslims has been a major topic recently in the presidential race. After the San Bernardino attack, Donald Trump called for a temporary ban on Muslims who are not U.S. citizens entering the United States until the government can “figure out what is going on.”

Hillary Clinton addressed the topic during the December 19 Democratic debate.

“I worry greatly that the rhetoric coming from the Republicans, particularly Donald Trump, is sending a message to Muslims here in the United States and literally around the world that there is a clash of civilizations,” Clinton said, “that there is some kind of Western plot or even war against Islam, which then I

believe fans the flames of radicalization.”

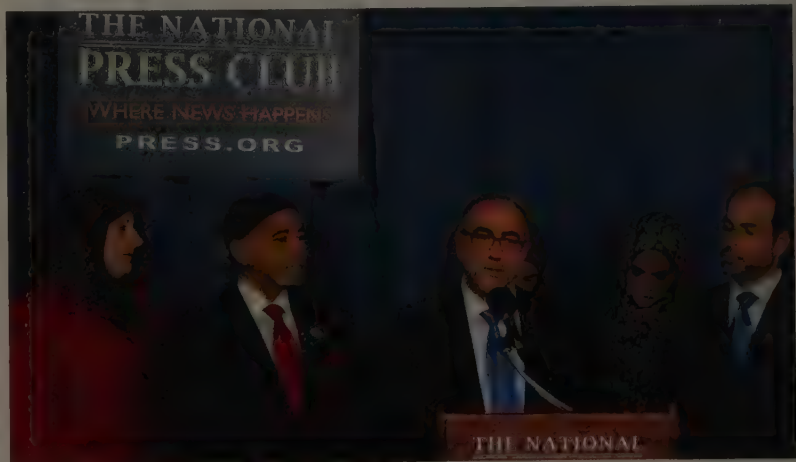
Muslim officials speaking at a press conference December 21 about the campaign to counter Islamophobia cautioned that many of their organizations had a tax status that barred them from directly or indirectly participating in any political campaign.

However, Awad of CAIR commented on Trump’s language about Muslims.

“He knows better,” Awad said. “We feel the heat.”

The Muslim officials said a key component of their work together would be finding ways to counter the appeal of ISIS among young American Muslims.

“We have to do a better job of reaching out to our young people from the pulpits of the mosques in America and teaching them how they can avoid the seductive approaches that are found on the Internet from groups like ISIS and



AFTER ATTACKS: During a press conference December 21 in Washington, D.C., leaders in the U.S. Council of Muslim Organizations, a coalition of national and local groups, announced a campaign of education, outreach, and civic engagement to counter Islamophobia. From left are Kristin Szremski, Imam Mahdi Bray, Oussama Jammal, Rabbiah Ahmed, and Nihad Awad.

others,” said Johari Abdul-Malik, an imam and governmental affairs director for the Muslim Alliance in North America. “We believe that the issue is bigger than ISIS. It is a conspiracy to take advantage of our young people, and we are redoubling our efforts as a community.” —David Cook, *The Christian Science Monitor*

Professor suspended for saying Christians, Muslims ‘worship the same God’

A Wheaton College professor has been placed on leave because, in explaining why she wanted to show solidarity with Muslims by wearing an Islamic headscarf, she wrote that Muslims and Christians worship the same God. Her comments have sparked fierce theological debate.

“I stand in religious solidarity with Muslims because they, like me, a Christian, are people of the book,” Larycia Elaine Hawkins wrote in a Facebook post December 10. “We worship the same God.”

Her employer disagreed, placing the tenured political science professor on administrative leave on December 15 “in order to give more time to explore theological implications of her recent public statements concerning Christianity and Islam.”

Wheaton administrators noted that the faculty and staff sign a statement of faith, and they said her view that Muslims and Christians worship the same God “appears to be in conflict” with that statement.

“Dr. Hawkins’s administrative leave resulted from theological statements that seemed inconsistent with Wheaton College’s doctrinal convictions and is in no way related to her race, gender, or commitment to wear a hijab during Advent,” Wheaton’s statement says.

Prominent Christians, including evangelicals, have made similar claims to the one Hawkins made. George W. Bush regularly expressed the sentiment during his presidency.

“I believe the God that the Muslim



PHOTO BY LARYCIA HAWKINS VIA FACEBOOK

SUSPENDED: Larycia Elaine Hawkins, a professor of political science at Wheaton College in Illinois, chose to wear a hijab during Advent as a sign of solidarity with Muslims, posting photos on Facebook along with comments, including one that said Muslims and Christians “worship the same God.” The college said it is investigating whether those comments are at odds with its statement of faith.

prays to is the same God that I pray to,” President Bush told Al Arabiya News in 2007. “After all, we all came from Abraham.”

Several dozen Wheaton students held a protest December 16 during which they delivered a letter to the college’s administration demanding that Hawkins be reinstated.

The students wrote in their letter to the president and provost, “There is nothing in Dr. Hawkins’s public statements that goes against the belief in the power and nature of God, Christ, or the Holy Spirit that the Statement of Faith deems as a necessary requirement for affiliation with Wheaton College.”

In a Facebook post December 13, Hawkins responded to the initial criticism she had received. She wrote that “asserting our religious solidarity with Muslims and Jews will go a long way toward quelling religious violence and enervating religionist fear of the religious other. Whether or not you find this position, one held for centuries by countless Christians (church fathers, saints, and regular Christian folk like me), to be valid, I trust that we can peacefully disagree on theological points and affirm others.”

In a statement released December 11

on “Christian Engagement with Muslim Neighbors,” Wheaton had outlined its position on the debate: “While Islam and Christianity are both monotheistic, we believe there are fundamental differences between the two faiths, including what they teach about God’s revelation to humanity, the nature of God, the path to salvation, and the life of prayer.”

Charles Kimball, an ordained Southern Baptist minister and professor and director of religious studies at the University of Oklahoma—Hawkins’s alma mater—said he likes to highlight the differences in people’s understanding of God, even within the same congregation, by asking members to share their understanding of God with each other.

“There is in my view no ambiguity at all that Muslims, Christians, and Jews are talking about the same God,” Kimball said. “What I have found is that this is more of a device that Christian religious leaders use to drive a wedge between Christians and Jews on the one side and Muslims on the other.”

Kimball has not heard of such debate within Islam. Muslims have no doubt they worship the same God as Christians because according to Islamic self-understanding, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were all given from God as the same original truth, he said.

Kimball noted that Arab Christians of all sects use *Allah* as the word for God.

Scot McKnight, professor of New Testament at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary in Lombard, Illinois, wrote on his blog, Jesus Creed, that between the Abrahamic traditions “there are dramatic—religion-splitting—differences on who God is and how God is understood.”

Those differences are expressed in beliefs in the incarnation and the Trinity, McKnight wrote.

“We can agree to some degree at a generic level,” wrote McKnight, “but we don’t worship God in the generic. We worship either the God of Abraham and Moses, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, or the God of Mohammed. The God in each of the faiths is understood differently enough to conclude that saying we worship the ‘same’ God muddies the water.” —Lucy Schouten, *The Christian Science Monitor*; CHRISTIAN CENTURY staff

Kenyan Muslims protect Christian fellow passengers when militants attack bus

Christian and Muslim leaders in Kenya praised a group of Muslims who shielded Christians after gunmen ambushed a passenger bus.

The gunmen, suspected to be part of the jihadist group al-Shabaab, sprayed the bus with bullets, killing two. But when they asked the 62 Muslim passengers to help identify the Christian passengers, the Muslims refused and told the militants to kill everyone or leave.

Defeated, the militants left hurriedly, according to witnesses of the December 21 attack.

The gesture has since united Christians and Muslims in Mandera County, which lies in the country's northern region along the border with Somalia.

"I think it's an act of bravery for the Muslims who risked their lives to protect the Christians," said Anglican bishop Julius Kalu of Mombasa. "This is the true meaning of religion, and we congratulate them."

Kalu said true religion protects neighbors and defends the weak and the poor. He attributed the development to the recent campaigns around peaceful religious coexistence.

Roman Catholic bishop Joseph Alessandro of Garissa said it was a very positive gesture from the Muslims.

"It shows that even the local Muslims do not support the Islamists' violence," Alessandro said. "Now al-Shabaab knows they have no support."

Ali Roba, Mandera County's governor, praised the Muslims' reaction and said some were injured when they refused to be separated from the Christians.

Ali Hassan Joho, Mombasa's governor, tweeted: "They demonstrated to the world that Islam stands for peace. This selfless act strengthens harmonious and tolerant relations."

Sheikh Abdullahi Salat, chairman of the Garissa County Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims, said Muslims in Kenya oppose al-Shabaab.

"We have often stressed that we don't support the militants," Salat said. "We

have insisted we have no problem with our Christian brothers. This confirms it."

Al-Shabaab has launched a series of attacks in Kenya since 2011, when the country's army entered Somalia to fight the militants. In 2013, the group attacked the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi, killing 67.

At least 48 people were killed in Mpeketoni in 2014 after militants attacked villages and a town center. Later that year, the militants killed 28 people, mainly Christian teachers traveling on a bus in Mandera County. Weeks later, the group killed 36 non-Muslim quarry workers.

But the biggest attack was in April 2015, when the group massacred 148 mostly Christian students at Garissa University College. —Fredrick Nzwili, Religion News Service

Politics threaten plans for historic gathering of Orthodox churches

A religious summit last held more than 1,200 years ago is now in jeopardy because of Syria's civil war.

The world's Orthodox churches, the second-largest ecclesial family in Christianity with 14 autocephalous (independent) member churches, had scheduled their first major council since 787 for May in Istanbul. Now it is no longer clear when or where the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church will be held.

The chain of events now threatening to affect the council began in November when Turkey, which opposes Syrian president Bashar Assad, shot down a Russian bomber that it said had strayed into its air space while attacking Syrian rebels. Moscow, which supports Assad, demanded an apology, and Ankara refused to give it.

The Kremlin reacted with a full range of diplomatic punishments, suspending a joint energy project, banning imports of some Turkish products, and canceling visa-free travel for Russians to Turkey. Russian president Vladimir Putin called the incident "a stab in the back by accomplices of terrorists" and threat-

ened serious consequences for Turkey.

Out of the media spotlight, the Russian Orthodox Church, which has close ties to the Kremlin, also became active. Within days, Metropolitan Hilarion, head of external relations for the church, called off a trip he was about to take to Turkey for preparatory talks about the council.

Then another senior Russian cleric asked whether, under these political circumstances, the summit could be held as planned in Istanbul, which has been the center of the Orthodox world since it was known as Constantinople, capital of the Byzantine Empire, before the Muslim conquest of 1453.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate, headquarters of the loosely tied Orthodox family, is based there, as is Orthodoxy's spiritual leader Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I. The plan was to hold the council in Hagia Irene, a church-turned-museum in the Topkapi Palace complex where the Council of Constantinople confirmed the Nicene Creed in 381.

In early December, Igor Yakymchuk, secretary for inter-Orthodox relations at the Moscow Patriarchate, hinted to RIA Novosti news agency that the council might be postponed.

"It is not known when it will take place," he said. "If the situation deteriorates, it's quite possible the council will be held elsewhere. It's difficult to talk about."

Yakymchuk made no suggestions, but Russian media began mentioning other possible venues, including Moscow and the Orthodox ecumenical center in Chambésy, outside Geneva.

The chill winds from Moscow are the latest twist in the start-and-stop preparations for the Great Council that go back to at least 1961.

In the 20th century, political upheavals and economic problems prompted many Orthodox believers to emigrate from their homes in Greece, Turkey, and the Middle East to Europe, North America, and elsewhere. Immigrants started parishes and dioceses of their own national churches, with the result that some major cities had several different Orthodox bishops.

Preparations for the pan-Orthodox council have highlighted differences between the large and well-funded Russian Church, which makes up about



THIRD ROME: The Cathedral of the Annunciation is in the Kremlin in Moscow.

two-thirds of Orthodoxy's 300 million-strong world membership, and the fragile Ecumenical Patriarchate, which is tightly limited by the Turkish state and counts only about 3,000 members in its independent Church of Constantinople.

One problem is how the 14 member churches should decide major issues. Some leaders favored majority voting, but the Russian Church insisted on and won a rule requiring consensus, which meant it retained veto power over any changes to be made.

Orthodox disagree over relations to other Christian churches, especially to Catholics, who since the Second Vatican Council have been interested in coming closer and allowing intercommunion among believers split since 1054.

While Bartholomew shows keen interest, the Russian Church has blocked progress because of its dispute with the Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine, which is loyal to Rome. Moscow accuses it of trying to take property and poach believers from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church affiliated with the Russians, something the Greek Catholics deny.

The Orthodox also find complex questions of authority, such as deciding which autonomous member church is responsible for new communities in the diaspora or how to uphold the tradition of one bishop per city in Western countries.

Hilarion, one of the most important figures in preparations for the summit, tipped his hand last year when he said just holding the council would be historic and Moscow saw no need for it to make any changes. —Tom Heneghan, Religion News Service

Russian Orthodox Church says military intervention in Syria is a 'holy war'

For many in the West, the idea that a church would take an overtly hawkish stance in the conflict in Syria is an utterly foreign concept.

But then, the Russian Orthodox Church is not Western, said Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, the church's most recognizable spokesman, in his Moscow office.

"The idea that church and state should be alienated from each other is not a characteristic of Orthodox civilization," said the senior cleric, whose eyes almost seem to burn. "It's a characteristic of the West."

Not well known or understood in the West, the Russian Orthodox Church has been Russia's chief source of spiritual identity for most of its 1,000-year existence. Though it was nearly destroyed by the communists, it has since rebounded sharply to become once again the Kremlin's ideological bulwark.

As that relationship has solidified, the church has also integrated with the military. Russian media frequently run photos of priests blessing weaponry, including war planes, and Orthodox chaplains are embedded in most military units. And the church is underscoring its enthusiastic backing for Russia's military intervention in Syria—a fight Chaplin dramatically describes as "a holy war against terrorism."

The Orthodox Church, which has deep historical connections with the dwindling Christian communities of the Middle East, was alarmed by the mass flight of Iraq's Christians following the U.S. invasion of that country. When the conflict in Syria began almost five years ago, the church began lobbying the Kremlin to take a strong stand in defense of Syrian Christians, who are about 10 percent of the population. Experts say the church's insistence certainly played a role in President Vladimir Putin's decision to intervene directly in the conflict.

Christianity came to Russia via Byzantium, the eastern half of the old

Roman Empire, which survived until the Muslim Turks overran it almost 600 years ago. The Russian Orthodox Church subsequently took up the mantle of eastern Christianity, and Moscow styled itself as the "Third Rome," with a special duty to protect Christians of the Middle East living under Muslim rule. An 1853 proclamation by Czar Nicholas I claiming Russia's right to support Christians in the Turkish Ottoman Empire—which then included Syria and the Holy Land—precipitated the Crimean War, which pitted Russia against Turkey, Britain, and France.

"Russian czars and church for centuries maintained close relations with Middle Eastern Christians, and declared the right to support them; that's part of our historical consciousness," said Iosif Diskin, chair of the interreligious affairs commission of the Russian Public Chamber, a semiofficial civil society assembly. "But today it's not just the church, but much of Russian society that has become agitated about the fate of Christian minorities in Syria."

It's difficult to gauge how much the church's vocal support accounts for the public's backing of the war. But polls conducted two months into the Russian intervention showed more than half backed the air war, though more than two-thirds say they would oppose sending in Russian ground troops.

When asked by pollsters, Russians overwhelmingly aver to be religious believers; in fact, over 80 percent say so. About 70 percent of Russians identify themselves as Orthodox Christians. The remainder come from one of the constitutionally defined "founding" religions of Russia: Islam, Judaism, or Buddhism.

Yet few Russians bother to go to church on a regular basis. Chaplin said it's as many as 30 percent, other experts say the figure is more like 5 percent.

Whether they go to church or not, Chaplin argued that religious faith does shape people's consciousness, particularly with regard to the Middle East.

"Many Christians, not just Russians, see the Middle East as the crossroads of world history, as the origin and end of things," he said. "There is a very deep interest in things that happen there." —Fred Weir, *The Christian Science Monitor*

Japanese prime minister, party leaders seek policies that revive Shinto religion

Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe's deep adoration for the Ise Grand Shrine, the most sacred Shinto site in Japan, is no secret. He visits each January for the New Year and plans to host the 2016 summit of the Group of Seven industrialized nations in the nearby resort city of Shima.

"I believe it has something to do with his Shinto beliefs," said Satoru Otowa, a spokesman for the shrine, recalling a visit from the prime minister. "Everyone saw how passionately he prayed."

Ise, about 200 miles southwest of Tokyo near the Pacific coast, enshrines the sun goddess Amaterasu, who is believed to be an ancestral god of the imperial family.

"I wanted to choose a place where world leaders could have a full taste and feel of Japan's beautiful nature, bountiful culture, and traditions," he told reporters after announcing the location of the G7 summit, scheduled for May 26-27.

Abe's commitment to Japan's indigenous religion has also led him and his Liberal Democratic Party to pursue a wide range of Shinto-inspired policies—including more openly embracing Japan's imperial heritage, reforming aspects of Japanese education, and reevaluating the country's wartime record.

Perhaps as old as Japan itself, Shinto has no explicit creed or major religious texts. Its adherents pray to *kami*, spirits found in both living and inanimate things, and believe in a complex body of folklore that emphasizes ancestor worship. As Japan modernized in the late 19th century, officials made Shinto the state religion and gave the emperor divine stature. The religion became closely associated with Japanese militarism, leading to its separation from state institutions after World War II.

Some critics see the country's newfound interest in Shinto as a sign of simmering nationalism at best. At worst,

they describe it as a reprise of the ideology used to promote Japanese superiority and a presumed right to govern Asia.

But among conservatives it reflects a fear that Japan has gone adrift after two decades of economic stagnation, materialism, and the rise of neighboring China. Many believe the time has come for the religion to regain its rightful place in the public sphere.

Keiji Furuya, who serves in Abe's cabinet, considers the three years he spent as an exchange student in New York as a teenager among his most formative experiences. Furuya recalls marveling at America's displays of patriotism. He was astonished to see flags billowing from front porches and students reciting the Pledge of Allegiance in school.



Shinzo Abe

Growing up in Japan, Furuya never saw such displays. Emperor Hirohito renounced his status as a "living god" in 1946. The country's new constitution, drafted by U.S. occupation forces, enshrined pacifism as national policy and mandated the separation of state and religion. The U.S. occupation

inaugurated a period when Shinto began to disappear from Japanese society.

"For people like me who went through the postwar education system in Japan, raising a flag was not a popular thing to do," said Furuya, whose office conference room is adorned with three flags. "But as time went by . . . I came to believe that it was natural to have respect and pride in one's own country."

Interest in reforms has been building for the past decade. Introducing patriotic education in public schools was one of Abe's top initiatives during his first stint as prime minister from 2006 to 2007.

More recently, a new wave of conservatives helped the LDP win a landslide victory in 2012 and put Abe back in power. Their support helped him pass a package of laws this fall that allows Japan to send troops abroad in support of allies for the first time in its postwar era.

Abe and many of his top cabinet officials are longtime members of Shinto Seiji Renmei (the Shinto Association of Spiritual Leadership). Founded in 1969,

it has become one of the most influential political lobbying groups in Japan. According to the most recent count, 302 parliament members are affiliated with the association, compared with 44 two decades ago.

The association supports efforts to revise Japan's pacifist constitution, encourage patriotic education, and return the emperor to a more prominent place in Japanese society. It also calls for restoring the special status of Yasukuni Shrine, a controversial memorial to Japan's war dead, including convicted war criminals from World War II.

Iwahashi Katsuji, a spokesman for the Association of Shinto Shrines, which administers 80,000 shrines in Japan, said it's time for the Japanese to reevaluate their past.

"Even after the Meiji Restoration there are many good points," he said, referring to Japan's rapid transformation from a feudal farming society into an industrial power at the end of the 19th century. "Just saying that Japan lost the war and that Japan was bad and evil is not constructive."

Inoue Nobutaka, a professor of Shinto studies at Kokugakuin University in Tokyo, said it's far from clear how much of the past Abe and his supporters want to revive. But he contends that organizations such as Seiji Renmei and Nippon Kaigi, a like-minded nationalist group, hold more sway over the Abe administration than they did over its predecessors.

"These groups have been politically active for a long time," Nobutaka said. "Their influence has grown because Abe has turned to them for support."

Seiji Renmei launched a campaign this summer to encourage local education boards to adopt revised textbooks that eliminate negative depictions of Japan's wartime activities.

Abe's critics warn that the new textbooks could weaken an antiwar message they say has helped keep Japan peaceful for seven decades. In the eyes of China and South Korea, two targets of Japan's early-20th-century aggression, Abe and his supporters are historical revisionists who want to whitewash the country's wartime atrocities. —Michael Holtz, *The Christian Science Monitor*

People

PHOTO BY RELIGION NEWS SERVICE



■ **Jacques Mourad**, a Syriac Catholic priest who survived being held hostage for months by militants from the self-described Islamic State, is certain that his interfaith work saved his life.

Mourad was kidnapped in May from the Mar Moussa monastery along with a volunteer, taken to ISIS's de facto capital in Raqqa, and held in a bathroom.

"During these 84 days that I was a prisoner in this bathroom in Raqqa, it could be said that it was one of the most difficult experiences that a person can go through: that of losing one's liberty," Mourad said, speaking through an interpreter to members of Rome's Foreign Press Association on December 10, the first time he spoke publicly in detail about his ordeal. "For me it was also a very intense experience, from the spiritual point of view."

While the priest sought to sustain himself through prayer, he acknowledged there were moments close to despair, such as when extremists threatened him with beheading if he did not renounce Christianity. Mourad said he believes his reputation at the monastery, where he fostered interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims, saved his life.

"I'm convinced I'm alive also thanks to this mission," he said. "The work we did contributed to preventing Islamic State from killing me."

He recalled a moment in which he thought he was to be killed, when a man came and asked if he was Christian. Then the man surprised Mourad by greeting him: "That amazed me because normally the people [militants] don't shake Christians' hands or touch them, because they consider them impure. They don't even greet Muslims that don't think like them."

In August he and the volunteer kid-

napped with him were driven to another location, where he encountered 250 Christians abducted from his Al-Qaryatayn parish.

"I saw a young boy from my parish," he said. "As soon as I turned I suddenly saw all the 250 kidnapped Christians—the children, old people, disabled, women—it was a very hard moment for me."

In September ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi struck a deal to return the Christians to their community if they agreed to pay a tax and live under ISIS rule. The other options, Mourad said, were to have ISIS kill the men and keep the women captive, to enslave them all, or to wait until ransoms were paid.

After they were released, Mourad and his parishioners were taken back to Al-Qaryatayn and began celebrating mass in secret. Despite returning to "a certain sense of a normal life," Mourad said he soon decided to escape because conditions were becoming unbearable.

"Life had become unsustainable," he said. "We didn't have electricity, there was no food, water—it was difficult because it was also very dangerous. At the same time I felt a responsibility towards the Christians."

A Muslim friend helped smuggle Mourad out of Al-Qaryatayn in October; Mourad declined to provide further details.

While other Christians have been able to flee the area, Mourad said eight of his parishioners have been killed. Though he is especially concerned about his parishioners, Mourad described all Syrians as victims of war.

"We are responsible for the whole Syrian population, not only Christians," he said. —Rosie Scammell, Religion News Service

■ **Marvin McMickle**, president of Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, was one of the speakers at a conference that brought together more than 300 clergy and community leaders to address race relations.

"We're not going to be able to resolve the issues of racism alone, whether it is the black church alone or the white church alone," McMickle said. "I think both hands have to be on the plow."

The Conference of National Black

Churches, founded in 1978 to bring African American denominations together, hosted the mid-December event, "The Healing of Our Nation: Race and Reconciliation," which also included leaders from mainline Protestant denominations. The three-day meeting took place in Charleston, South Carolina, with a worship service at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, where nine African Americans were killed during a Bible study in June. A white extremist, who wrote that he had hoped to "start a race war," was charged with federal hate crimes for the massacre.

James Forbes Jr., senior minister emeritus of New York City's Riverside Church and the CNBC summit's keynote speaker, said clergy are seeking solutions to the national crises of racism, police brutality, and gun violence.

"Only a collaborative effort across race lines holds any prospect for addressing the seriousness of the problem now," Forbes said.

While some predominantly white churches such as the Southern Baptist Convention and United Methodists have issued apologies for racism, Princeton University religion professor Albert J. Raboteau said recently that small, face-to-face gatherings, such as sharing meals and Bible studies, are "maybe even more important than the larger statements and apologies by denominations."

Forbes said he has developed such a Bible study guide that is based on the book of Ephesians and encourages participants to acknowledge their feelings of anger and bitterness but also seek to foster understanding.

"I am proposing that because of what happened in Charleston, that it took place at the Bible study, faith communities, in honor of those Charleston Nine, ought to hold Bible studies in which there is for the first time a demand that the groups be multiracial," Forbes said, "and that they discuss issues about what we as individual congregations can do." —Adelle M. Banks, Religion News Service



PHOTO COURTESY OF COLGATE ROCHESTER CROZER DIVINITY SCHOOL



PHOTO COURTESY OF DRUM MAJOR INSTITUTE

LIVING BY The Word

January 24, Third Sunday after the Epiphany
1 Corinthians 12:12–31, Luke 4:14–21

IF JESUS BRINGS a sense of entitlement into the synagogue in this week's Gospel reading, this is the least of the concerns the people of Nazareth have. Prophets are never accepted in their hometown, as he reminds them later. But more astonishing than the hometown boy reading the scroll like a man is Jesus' claim that he is the fulfillment of the scripture he reads. Indeed, many are praising his teaching until the moment he crosses that line.

It is difficult for 21st-century Western Christians to grasp just how shocking Jesus' announcement is to this first-century synagogue. When a teacher unfurled a scroll to read the sacred text aloud, Jews expected interpretation. They awaited fresh insight from their teachers—but not this. This goes beyond the pale.

The passage that Jesus reads, Isaiah 61:1–2, describes the year of Jubilee, when it is promised that crushing debts will be forgiven and captives will be set free, injustices turned back and equity reset. Furthermore, in some communities Isaiah 61:1–2 was understood as a reference to the Teacher of Righteousness—the Messiah—who was to come. Jesus' proclamation that “today this scripture has been fulfilled” identifies him as the one they have been expecting for centuries.

It is tempting for American Christians to think that the most shocking aspect here is the specific content of the Isaiah passage. We think people anywhere would be upset by a claim that God's favor rests on the lowliest of society: the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed. From our cultural perspective, this kind of favor is nonsensical. The evidence demonstrates that God's favor rests on those who prosper. Why would Jesus announce that he has come to do the opposite, especially when the opposite could potentially upset the favor the powerful already enjoy?

The epistle reading addresses this theme more directly. In his letter to the church in Corinth, Paul admonishes the powerful members to honor the weaker members for their own sake. He encourages the congregation to be unified, using a common metaphor of his day—the human body—but he gives the metaphor an important twist. In many ancient writings, the image of the body is used to mollify those of the lowest social and political status, reminding them of their duty to serve those who are naturally superior. Paul reverses this interpretation: “The members of the body that seem weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect.”

Paul instructs the people to understand that each member of the body of Christ is essential to the others, neither sub-

servient nor superior. For is it not ludicrous to reduce a body to just one function? If it has only a head, it is no longer a body.

Like the Corinthians, many American Christians identify more readily with the strong than with the weak. So Paul's metaphor of the body rings true. We recognize the admonition to honor the weak as shocking, revolutionary teaching.

But in Luke's story, the people of Nazareth are themselves the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed. They are under the rule of a foreign power; they are starved, controlled, and enslaved. They wait for the Messiah with great anticipation and hope because they believe he will change their condition and free them from their captivity. The Messiah is good news. They have been praying for his arrival for centuries.

So the specifics of the promise of what the Messiah will do are not what shocks Nazareth, however it might shock us. The shock in Nazareth is Jesus' claim that now is the time—that the Messiah is here, and he is the one.

It brings to mind the Hebrew people wandering in the wilderness and longing to return to Egypt where, even though they were slaves, they had food to eat and shelter over their heads. They are on their way to the promised land; they have committed themselves to the long journey toward freedom. But it frightens them to embrace liberation. The shock in Nazareth is the shock of an oppressed people being told that the chains of their captivity are falling to the ground—not in the future, but on that very day.

In the 1980s, priest and theologian Ernesto Cardenal studied Luke 4 with a group of Nicaraguan peasants. He writes that one woman responded this way:

What he read in the book of the prophet is prophecy of liberation. And it's a teaching that a lot of Christians haven't learned yet, because we can be in a church singing day and night tra-la-la-la, and it doesn't matter to us that there are so many prisoners and that we are surrounded by injustice, with so many afflicted hearts . . . so much unfairness in the country, so many women whose eyes are filled with tears.

Another member of the group offered this insight: “Just by announcing liberation he was already fulfilling this prophecy. And just by saying ‘today this prophecy is fulfilled’ he was announcing liberation.”

Perhaps this view from the underside of society provides a lens to see what others cannot. Perhaps we might “clothe with greater honor” the weaker members of the body if we heard the Gospel through their perspectives. Jesus' pronouncement takes on fresh, powerful significance when we understand that Jesus was not only challenging the powerful but also provoking the least among us to claim liberation.

Reflections on the lectionary

January 31, Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

1 Corinthians 13:1-13, Luke 4:21-30

AFTER JESUS TAKES the scroll, reads the words of the prophet Isaiah, and then delivers the startling announcement that he is the fulfillment of scripture, he pushes the shock index even further. It's not enough to proclaim to the poor, the captives, the hurting, and oppressed that freedom is now theirs, that their long-awaited Messiah brings them good news. Jesus challenges those around him, people of low social and economic status, to accept others whom even they may have disregarded—the widow, the leper, the foreigner.

First, Jesus dares the people to ask for a demonstration of the wonders he performed in Capernaum, a city with many gentiles. Surely he would do for his hometown what he did for strangers, people who aren't even in the fold. But Jesus answers his own question—"no prophet is accepted in his hometown," he tells them—and instead of miracles, he gives them two stories from their own scriptures. When there was famine in the land during the time of Elijah, the prophet was sent to a widow not in Israel but at Zarephath in Sidon, in order to deliver the good news of reconciliation. And when there were many lepers in Israel during the time of Elisha, only one leper was cleansed and healed of his affliction: Naaman, in Syria.

In these two instances, God chose foreigners over the faithful—a theme Jesus signals when he visits Capernaum before traveling to Nazareth. Upon hearing this, the people in Nazareth become enraged and turn on him with deadly violence.

In contrast to this week's Gospel reading's violence, the epistle reading is the famous "love chapter" of 1 Corinthians: "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way . . ." The writer of Luke may be challenging his readers to accept even those whom the oppressed might reject, but Paul reminds us to act with love in all things.

In 21st-century America, the call to include all people is strong among Christians. Yes, Liberty University president Jerry Falwell Jr. has invited students to deter terrorism by carrying guns on campus. ("Let's teach them a lesson if they ever show up here.") Presidential candidate Donald Trump has called for blocking Muslims from entering the United States. Yet many American Christians have embraced a radical hospitality that would protect foreigners in the United States.

In my own city of Indianapolis, the Roman Catholic arch-

diocese recently challenged Governor Mike Pence to release state funds (as required by federal law) for the support of a Syrian refugee family relocating to Indiana. The response from Christian (and non-Christian) communities throughout the state was overwhelmingly positive. A United Methodist church in town organized a vigil and rally to show its support. Danyelle Ditmer, a pastor there, told the *Indianapolis Star* that the refugees "are real people in need."

Outside the statehouse, people protested Pence's attempt to prevent any Syrian refugees from coming to Indiana. "Jesus was a refugee" was a favorite slogan on handheld signs.

The protesters could easily find support for their cause in Luke 4, when Jesus proclaims good news and inclusion for the poor, the oppressed, and even the foreigner in the kingdom of God. But the human spirit, when compelled by a faithful commitment to social justice, can sometimes become so consumed with outrage that it fails to heed Paul's equally important call to act with love in all things.

As a young pastor fresh out of seminary I could get so caught up in my anger about the many wrongs that flourish unchecked in the world—poverty, war, sexism, racism—that I

Jesus cites two instances when God chose foreigners over the faithful.

would forget that the people I was preaching to were not generally the perpetrators of this injustice. They were more likely to be its victims. They were not powerful people in their social and political worlds. They were not government officials; they were not wealthy. If I could remember Paul's "still more excellent way," the way of love, I could stay in a frame of mind to care for hurting people while also calling them to work against injustice. A message based in love is much easier to hear than one emanating from anger.

Anger has its place in social justice movements, of course. Love, in Paul's understanding, doesn't replace anger. Love rejoices in truth, and sometimes the truth is infuriating—especially when it reveals suffering and loss, discrimination and inequality. What's more, love outlasts everything. "It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."

Thanks be to God that love will outlast every injustice and oppression, every humiliation and regret, every impulse to violence and discrimination. Without love, we might just be a noisy gong or clanging cymbal.



Read **M. Craig Barnes** @
Faith Matters



“Pastors dare not allow the limited and weak body known as church to be their measure. For that, they can only turn back to the Christ they have ‘put on’ in their baptisms. This is what actually frees pastors to return to the congregations that have enough problems to assure them that they’ll never run out of work.”

(from The Pastor as Minor Poet)



LIVING BY The Word

February 7, Transfiguration Sunday

Luke 9:28-43a

PETER, JAMES, and John glimpse a bit of heaven up on the mountaintop with Jesus, according to Luke 9. With white lights and dazzling clothes, Jesus' face shines as brightly as the sun. Moses and Elijah are there as well—the great law-giver and the prophet who was expected to precede the Messiah. It's truly amazing, spectacular. A glimpse of heaven—high up on the mountaintop, far away from the chaos and devastation below.

It sounds wonderful, this mountaintop experience. What might change if we could find proof of something up there greater than ourselves, greater than the suffering world below, greater than the war and famine and violence and fear of this world? Or what if we could just escape the mess and muck of human life down here, if only for a little while?

Some people try crystals or meditation to transcend the harsh realities of this world. Others try yoga or prayer. Some literally climb mountains to get away from the chaos of human life, to be nearer to God's peace. Other people mistakenly think drugs or alcohol will help them escape a world filled with pain and suffering.

For many people who cannot literally escape the brutality of their lives—for those whose communities are engulfed in violence, or for those living in extreme family turmoil—intellectual or emotional transcendence is a lifeline, a necessary tactic for survival. Anne Frank, for example, escaped the terror of being discovered by German Nazis by writing beautiful, heart-wrenching words throughout the pages of her diary.

If we could get a glimpse of heaven, if we could see something really spectacular, then instead of wondering, we would have proof—an experience that we could refer back to for the rest of our lives. I long to be able to say, "I am an eyewitness . . . I heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain" (2 Pet. 1:18). That witness could also be aimed at helping others, like Anne Frank's inspiring words, or it could be like "a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (2 Pet. 1:19). But my faith has come instead through study, prayer, mission, and service.

When Peter sees Moses and Elijah standing with Jesus on the mountaintop, he offers to build three dwellings for them, a memorial to them. He wants to honor and preserve the moment forever.

But God stops Peter in the middle of his sentence: "While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them." God

redirects Peter: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" God cuts Peter's transcendental moment short and points to Jesus in the flesh, God's Son on earth. When the others look up again, the bright lights are dimmed. Moses and Elijah are gone. There is only Jesus, in flesh and blood, fully human, there in the mess of their fear and trembling, comforting them, preparing to endure the trials and tribulations of human life.

God is with us. Even though I have not experienced a mountaintop revelation, I can know that my God is near—down here, in the midst of my messy life. This Jesus, our Savior, did not escape even from human death. He chose to suffer the cruelty of crucifixion rather than escape to a mountaintop closer to God.

Peter, James, and John are not the same after this revelation. They come back down from their mountaintop experience into the cruel world that will kill their friend and leader, but they are changed by their experience. When Jesus was transfigured before them, the disciples caught a vision, a glimpse. They heard a voice. For one moment the tough crust of mundane reality was peeled back, and they saw Jesus as the long-promised Christ, the one sent from God to save them. When they walked back down the mountain, they walked into a very different world.

These mystical moments, when the curtain of the divine is pulled back and someone gets a glimpse, can change the way the rest of us see and experience the mundane world around us.

On the eve of his assassination, Martin Luther King Jr. shared a mountaintop experience at the Mason Temple in Memphis. His testimony changed America. He concluded his sermon with a reference to Moses on the eve of his death. "I don't know what will happen now," said King. "We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. . . . And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land."

King's vision changed America. He gave us a wider vision, a new way of seeing reality, so that today we too glimpse bits of heaven, that promised land, down here in our messy, gritty world. We glimpse a time when people of all races will show love for one another. King was a lamp shining in a dark place until the day dawned and the morning star rose in the hearts of many people.

Such visions fill our ordinary and mundane, sometimes painful and troubling daily lives with new meaning. They remind us that the God of heaven is with us here on earth.

The author is Verity A. Jones, executive vice president at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis.

An ID card turns strangers into neighbors

Names with faces

by Lee Hull Moses

I'M SITTING at the back of a church hall full of people, and the only people facing me are the ones at the podium up front and a handful of toddlers perched on laps. One little girl has pigtails sticking straight up from her head; she smiles at me when we make eye contact.

The people gathered this morning are mostly immigrants, many undocumented. They are here to get a photo ID card distributed by FaithAction International House, an organization that serves and advocates for immigrants in Greensboro, North Carolina, where I live. FaithAction ID cards are recognized by our police department and by other local organizations and businesses. They provide a much-needed means of identification for people who aren't able to access government-issued IDs.

I could get a FaithAction ID—everyone is eligible—but I don't need one. I have a long line of documents authenticating my identification, going back to the day I was born. I'm rarely concerned about proving who I am. That's not true for many people in this room, where the little girl has now escaped her mother's reach and is wandering in the aisle.

When the speakers at the podium are done, the people in front of me remain, waiting for their turn to have their picture taken. I slip down the side toward the front and linger for a minute in the doorway, looking back at the faces in the crowded room. Each face tells a story.

On a sunny fall morning, I wait for David Fraccaro in the lobby of FaithAction's building, a converted house in one of the oldest neighborhoods in Greensboro. The FaithAction executive director is an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, and I run into him often at local clergy gatherings. As I take a seat in what was probably once the dining room, I see a collection of toys in the corner, an effort to make this a welcoming place for people who aren't often welcomed and who often have to wait. A bulletin board is crowded with multilingual flyers for community events, along with one for FaithAction's annual fund-raising event—not a dinner gala but a musical revue featuring artists, including Fraccaro himself.

The predominant narrative about immigration in our country, Fraccaro explains when we sit down to talk, is that immigrants are a problem to be solved, or helpless and in need of saving. He leans forward, underscoring his point; his passion for this work shows. "There isn't a narrative that tells that [an

immigrant] is an individual, a human person, with a story of his or her own." That's the story FaithAction wants to tell.

Many of the immigrants served by FaithAction are living in mixed-status families: while some members of the household have proper documentation, others don't. This complicates access to everything from education to health care to social services. These families live with the constant threat of deportation, are usually near or below the poverty line, and are often learning a new language even as they navigate an unfamiliar culture.

The ID program is a response to this lack of documentation. The initiative grew out of a series of community dialogues

The lack of an ID poses a problem for police as well as for immigrants.

between law enforcement and the immigrant community, organized by FaithAction and hosted by a number of local faith communities.

FaithAction staff and volunteers had noticed a disturbing trend among the immigrants who came to them for help: they were afraid to go to the police. Domestic violence victims, sorely in need of protection and assistance, were particularly fearful. "You can't talk to them," Fraccaro reports hearing from one client. "They're like sharks out to get us."

So FaithAction did what they do best: they brought people together to talk about it. First it was faith leaders, particularly from congregations with deep connections to the immigrant community. Then these faith leaders had conversations with police officers. This led in turn to a series of public dialogues held in congregations, often after a regular weekly service, at which police officers and immigrants were encouraged to talk directly to one another, to share stories about their experiences, and to discuss their fears and concerns. Over a year, FaithAction helped host six well-attended dialogue sessions.

*Lee Hull Moses is pastor of First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Greensboro, North Carolina. She is coauthor of *Hopes and Fears: Everyday Theology for New Parents and Other Tired, Anxious People* (Alban).*



NEIGHBORS: An officer with the Greensboro Police Department and a FaithAction client get photos taken for their identification cards.

Through these open conversations, misconceptions were cleared up. Immigrants learned that the police aren't in charge of issuing drivers licenses and that they don't work for Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Police officers learned to use language like *residents* instead of *citizens*. Fraccaro tells me that by the end of the dialogue series, the consistent message from officers was this: *We are not here to enforce federal immigration law. We are here to serve and protect all residents. We need your help.*

Slowly the narrative began to change. Immigrants stopped seeing police as sharks out to get them. Officers began to understand the fear immigrants live with. Officers listened to people's stories and then began to share their own: some had immigrated themselves or had immigrants in their families. One officer told the gathered group that his mother had walked through the desert to get to the United States. Officers developed what Fraccaro calls a "professional vulnerability" that has increased their authority by evoking the respect of the people they serve.

"You could see it around the room," he tells me, thinking back to those dialogues, now several years ago. "It was the power of the Holy Spirit, in that sacred space." The police listened to the people, and the people felt safe.

There was one consistent theme that arose from these dialogues. The lack of identifying documentation wasn't just a problem for the immigrants; it was a problem for the police, too. Officers who encountered someone without any ID had to leave the street, go into the precinct, and file a report. What would have been a routine traffic stop turned into a whole

afternoon of paperwork, and it took the officer away from patrolling the streets.

What if, they wondered together, there was a way to provide undocumented immigrants with an ID card that the police could recognize and trust?

A private foundation donated the start-up costs of the ID program, including some basic equipment such as a camera and a printer. The first ID drive, held at one of the congregations that had hosted a dialogue session, was packed with 250 people.

From early on, the program had the support of the chief of police and city leaders. FaithAction staff and volunteers, along with law enforcement leadership, trained police officers to recognize and accept the FaithAction ID as a valid form of ID. At first, the ID cards were recognized only by the police. Soon, it became clear that people needed identification for all kinds of things. The success of the program within the police department convinced city leaders to accept the IDs as proof of residency to turn on water or to register kids for school. The library and the parks department began to recognize the ID as well.

The card also became much more than just a means of identification. FaithAction seeks to build stronger communities, not just provide assistance. So it arranged for ID cardholders to be eligible for discounts at certain local shops, museums, restaurants, even the community theater. Fraccaro says he encourages people who have access to other IDs to get the FaithAction card anyway and to take advantage of the discounts. It encourages the integration of places shared by the entire community, he explains.

volume 98, number 1

winter 2016

ANGLICAN THEOLOGICAL REVIEW

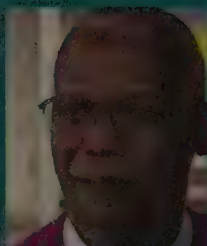
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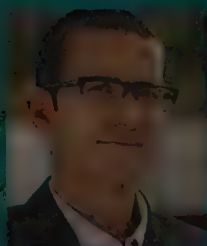
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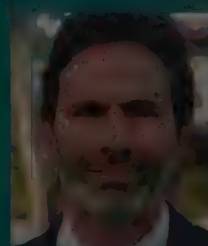
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Pub date / January 2016
Kindle, Nook, iBook edition / \$9.99
Single print copy / \$15.00
Bulk rates available

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On my way out after talking to Fraccaro, I stopped to chat for a minute with Dulce Ortiz, a former FaithAction client and now a staff member. She has used her ID to access health services for her family; it also served as supporting documentation so she could get her Mexican passport. She often uses her card for a discount at the local food co-op around the corner. ("We go there a lot for lunch," she says with a grin.) When Ortiz tells me she's used her card to get discounted admission to the Greensboro Children's Museum, I think of the many afternoons I've spent there with my own children, and I can see what Fraccaro means when he talks about shared community spaces.

The ID card doesn't just prove identity; it's a way of turning strangers into neighbors. "We wouldn't have gotten this partnership if we had named and shamed the police department," Fraccaro says. "There's a place for speaking truth to power"—he raises his fist as he says this—but this wasn't it. The partnership was built by carefully tending relationships, and by the participation of faith communities that opened up their sacred space and made it possible for a dialogue to begin.

Since the ID program began in 2013, FaithAction has issued more than 3,000 IDs to people in Greensboro and neighboring Alamance County. The group has fielded calls from law enforcement agencies across the state and the country, and it hopes to inspire other communities to establish

similar programs. Fraccaro notes that New York City instituted an immigrant ID program last year. "When was the last time Greensboro was ahead of New York on something?" he asks with a smile.

At an ID drive in August at the church across the street from the FaithAction house, Fraccaro welcomes people and gives a brief history of the program. I count 100 people, maybe more, seated in chairs in the church social hall. I'd pictured a line out the door, and I'm struck by the hospitality of simply having a place to sit in while we wait. Fraccaro pauses


An identity card declares that a person has a name, a face, a story.

every few sentences for someone to translate into Spanish. "This means trust," he says, holding up his own ID card, which he pulls out of his wallet. "It means we're all welcome here."


Along with the FaithAction staff and the clients here for IDs, there are a dozen or so representatives from community agencies, many of whom have set up booths at the back of the room for people to gather information or make a connection.

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Fraccaro calls them up to the front, and they each introduce themselves and their organization. Everything is translated, and many speakers start with the Spanish and translate for themselves. I'm particularly impressed by those who are clearly not fluent but have learned enough to convey their message; it's a sign of respect for the people gathered here that both inspires and convicts me.

There are representatives from the school system and a variety of city agencies, as well as other local community groups. A firefighter stands up to remind people to check the batteries in their smoke alarms and offers to deliver new batteries if necessary. Making eye contact with several parents who are corralling young kids, he adds, "We'll deliver them in our big red truck."

It's remarkable to see the number of people—city employees, law enforcement, community agency representatives—standing in front of this group of immigrants, many of whom may not have any documentation regarding their legal right to be here. Everyone is offering to help.

The ID program affirms and assumes the basic goodness of people. That's what makes it so powerful: the assumption that each individual has an identity—a name, a face, a story, and inherent worth—and that we can work together to build a stronger community. In Greensboro, as in the nation, racial-ethnic diversity has increased dramatically over the past generation. "Will we fear one another as strangers?" asks Fraccaro. "Or embrace one another as neighbors?"

The discipline of gratitude

I am told to be grateful
as I wake each morning
wrapped in the unfolding blanket of dawn,
shake off the moon, dying stars,
and taste the beige-gray breath
of incipient day.

Grateful to whom or what?
To the rain that coats the pavement
with its timid sheen, the birds' silence
in the settling damp, the bodies
of neighbors rising, reluctant,
in boxes of houses that line the street
with woe and weariness?

Let me drink strong coffee,
toast my bread with dailiness,
uncurl myself to a day lit only
by a hidden sun. I might have been
rich or famous, cured cancer,
saved the world. For now,
let me watch butter
melt as a golden flower.

Donna Pucciani

At the drive, Fraccaro is careful to explain what the card does and does not do, and each recipient has to sign a contract. "This is not a license to drive," he says. It will not impact your immigration status or help you avoid prosecution if you break the law. It's accepted only by the police department, not the sheriff's office or the highway patrol.

Along with ten dollars, clients have to have some kind of photo ID to get the ID card. This at first seems counterintuitive to me—aren't these people who have no documentation? But it makes sense: the program is built on trust, and FaithAction has to assure the police department and others who accept the card that the ID is accurate. An expired driver's license, a passport, even an ID from another country will do, along with proof of address. Fraccaro gets stern at this point in his talk: "If anyone here is planning to use false information today, don't do it," he says. "It won't do you any good, and it will hurt things for everybody else."

A police officer comes to the microphone next and speaks primarily in Spanish. I'm lost, my rusty high school Spanish inadequate to the task. But I can tell from his body language, his smile, and the crowd's reaction that this is a friendly exchange. There is laughter and gentle bantering back and forth. I learned later that this is one of the officers who was involved in the original dialogue series, and I can see how significant this has been in helping people understand that the police are here to help. *De dónde eres?* he asks at one point, and I understand that one. People raise their hands and answer: Cameroon, Honduras, Niger, Venezuela. They seem eager to tell him where they're from, to offer up the name of their home country into this room full of people who have come from all over the world.

Clients were given a number when they came in; after the introductions, they're called up a group at a time. Still there's no line. They can sit while they wait or listen to the officer as he continues his dialogue-turned-stand-up-routine in Spanish or visit one of the several agency representatives.

One by one, the clients take a seat on the stage, the light shining on them. It's clear that this card is more than a document that will save them some hassle with the police. As they have their picture taken, they are recognized as unique individuals—not just one big mass of people, not just a problem to be dealt with. A tall man with a cane carefully takes his cap off before the picture is snapped. A woman in a bright green dress sets her handbag next to her chair as she sits down. A mother feeds applesauce to her toddler as they wait. All of us slowly become neighbors.

When Fraccaro and I spoke in mid-September, I asked him what resistance the ID program had encountered. He gave a halfhearted grimace and a shrug—there's always push back when you do the kind of work he does. There had been a few attempts to pass laws restricting the use of such IDs, but so far they'd died in committee.

That changed a few weeks later, when the North Carolina legislature went into overdrive in the last days of its session, pushing several bills through with little opportunity for public debate. House Bill 318, otherwise known as the Protect North

Carolina Workers Act, passed easily. The bill seems designed to target undocumented immigrants. In addition to cutting food assistance for the unemployed, expanding the E-Verify program for employers, and banning sanctuary cities, HB318 limits the kinds of ID cards that government officials can accept. "It has little to do with protecting workers," Fraccaro told me later, exasperated.

A number of law enforcement officials spoke out against the bill, and a late amendment removed a provision that would

"This means trust," said Fraccaro, pulling an ID card out of his wallet.

have prevented police from accepting IDs such as FaithAction's. The Greensboro City Council spoke out against HB318 as well, voting overwhelmingly to oppose it; this did little to sway Governor Pat McCrory, who made a special trip to Greensboro to sign the bill into law. Under the new law, the city will no longer be able to accept the card as documentation for utilities or other services.

Fraccaro says this won't stop FaithAction from continuing its work. Two days after the governor signed the bill, the church

across the street from the FaithAction house is again filled with people eager to step in front of a camera and get an ID card. There are twice as many people this time, maybe more. Many have come from neighboring cities; for some, the new law means that consular IDs from their home countries are no longer valid, and they're hoping their communities will begin accepting the FaithAction card.

Representatives from the police department and community organizations are here again too, and their words are even more poignant this time. A uniformed police officer and a city council member each say to the crowd that despite HB318, we wish you well, and we're here to support you—because you are a part of our community. A representative from the library chooses her words carefully; it's not entirely clear whether the new law views librarians as government officials. "Our mission," she says, "is to share information, and we will continue to do so." I fall a little more in love with libraries right then.

But it is a police captain who blows me away. He assures the crowd that the police will continue to accept the FaithAction ID. He takes the microphone and says, in no uncertain terms, "The Greensboro Police Department does not care about your immigration status." I can't quite imagine what this statement must sound like to someone who lives in fear of deportation.

Fraccaro likes to say that an ID card is just a piece of plastic until a community gives it value. At least here, this morning, our community has.

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A Latino church empowers young musicians

Las bandas niños

by Jesse James DeConto

IT'S A LITTLE BEFORE EIGHT on a Tuesday night, and José Guillermo Salamea thinks his band of musicians, known as La Banda Revelation, might need a little pick-me-up. He stops the group in the middle of “Haz Llover” (“Make It Rain”), a confessional chorus written by Brazilian pastor and songwriter Fernandinho (who is so well known that, like a soccer star, he goes by his first name only). It’s a sparse tune, and Salamea wants to make sure it doesn’t drag.

“Niños, necesitan café?” he asks with a bemused smile, clapping out the rhythm. “Toca mas rápido!” (“Kids, do you need coffee? Play faster!”)

Salamea is music minister at Iglesia Hispana Emanuel in Durham, North Carolina, and he has been mentoring three of these band members for years. He taught Rosa Ramirez, 16, to sing, Andrea Hernandez, 16, to play guitar, and Jorge Duarte, 15, to play the drums. Salamea is teaching some 40 members of this congregation to play an instrument—everything from classical guitar to trumpet.

Iglesia Emanuel, a decade-old mission congregation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), began with six Guatemalans and a progressive pastor from the Dominican Republic. It is now 100 strong, with members coming from various countries in Central and South America. One quarter of its members participate in one of the church’s five worship teams. Emanuel has built strong ministries of social service and worship by paying attention to what its neighbors need.

“The idea was to make the church more visible,” says pastor Julio Ramirez-Eve. “The majority of the people coming here, they don’t have any money. The majority of the people, they’re living day by day—but still, they want their children to learn something.”

Since 2006, Salamea has taught more than 200 musicians. (Hernandez came to the church six years ago because she saw a sign outside advertising free music lessons.) A Wednesday night food pantry serves a hot meal and distributes groceries to 40 local families each week. Emanuel’s soccer program fields a youth team and a summer camp.

“If you have a goal to grow the church,” says Salamea, “you need to work with the families.”

At the Tuesday night rehearsal, Salamea has trouble keeping the teens focused on “Haz Llover” and its tempo. Hernandez, who has a keen sense of pitch, is fiddling with her tuning pegs. When Salamea mentions coffee, Ramirez turns to co-lead singer Gisell Garcia, 15, and says, “Did you know if you go to Starbucks, you can have anything free on your birthday?”

Salamea was recruited as music leader by David Keck, former pastor of Emanuel’s original host church, Northgate Presbyterian. The church was in a heavily Hispanic neighborhood, and Salamea was taking a course in English as a second language offered by the congregation. Ramirez became one of Salamea’s first students, and now she leads worship with Revelation at least once a month and studies voice at the Durham School of the Arts.

Salamea interrupts Ramirez’s thoughts of pumpkin spice lattes by playing Fernandinho’s melody on his electric piano. Skilled on all the rock instruments plus brass, Salamea himself fills empty spots in the various Emanuel bands until a student is ready to take his place. Duarte taps out a steady beat on his high-

The music program teaches skills and develops leaders.

hat but then slows down when the piano goes silent as Salamea makes way for the girls’ voices. The teacher halts them again.

“Tempo!” he says, clapping it out again. “That beat!”

He leads the band back through the intro, and this time they keep up the rhythm when the singers enter. “My heart is thirsty . . . make it rain.”

Salamea signals Duarte for a drum fill into a repeat of the song’s first and only verse. When they reach the chorus, Garcia struggles to find her alto harmony. Salamea points to his ear, and she retreats to the safety of the melody. Salamea’s commitment to skill-building is typical of today’s immigrant congregations.

Latino church music is influenced by Pentecostalism, with its emphasis on festive, dynamic music. Yet many churches lack the budget to hire even one professional musician, much less a whole band. But Pentecostalism also emphasizes bringing laypeople into leadership.

“Watching someone grow into their gift gave everyone—not just the musician—a sense of accomplishment and would add to our joy and praise,” says church historian Zaida Maldonado Pérez, who grew up with the rise of Latin

Jesse James DeConto is a writer, musician, and worship leader in Durham, North Carolina.



CHURCH MUSICIANS: Music teacher José Guillermo Salamea (left) directs five different worship bands at Iglesia Emanuel, including La Banda Revelation (right), which leads worship about once a month.

American contemporary worship music. “Sometimes the music was off tune or out of rhythm, but always joyful.”

These two objectives—dynamic music and leadership learned by doing—can sometimes be at odds. But Salamea and Emanuel have slowly enhanced the skills of these volunteer musicians, who are creating powerful music.

“I feel proud because it’s a really good church and a lot of people enjoy our music,” says Flor Rosas, 12, who has played piano in La Banda Niños de Diós (Children of God) for three years. “It feels good, because it feels like you’re singing songs to God.” Rosas wishes Salamea wouldn’t choose songs that force her to play more difficult patterns and stretch her fingers. But Emanuel’s music academy has given her the skills to play in a band at her middle school as well.

Eleven-year-old Christopher Vaquevano has been playing drums in La Banda Renacér (Rebirth) for almost three years, and he recently started learning trumpet. “It’s pretty fun to know that I’m playing for God, and people like how our band plays,” he says.

Ramirez sings in her high school choir and takes private voice lessons. She says music has become one of the most important and time-consuming parts of her life. “Singing has kind of always been there,” she says. “I guess I could call it a friend—something I go to when I’m not feeling that great.”

When it began, Emanuel’s Academia Música was the only free, church-based music school for Spanish speakers in the Raleigh-Durham area. Since then, other churches have followed suit, and the parachurch worship-training networks Instituto CanZion and Staff 24/7 have opened sites nearby.

“We decided to start training people who want to worship the Lord,” said Ricardo Correa, pastor of Centro de Alabanza Naciones Unidos (United Nations Worship Center), across town from Emanuel. “With the urgency of the need that the church has, we can’t afford to take three or four years.”

Emanuel sees itself not only training volunteers to lead worship but also sharing a gift that can build self-esteem. “Many of the children are doing bad in school because they come from another country with another language,” says pas-

tor Ramirez-Eve. “We try to provide an opportunity for the children to feel success.

“It’s the culture,” he says. “People enjoy the music. People dream to have a popular musician in the family. It’s the same with soccer: everybody wants to be Messi or Ronaldo. In the music, everybody wants to be Selena or Chayanne. Those are the dreams for many families.”

Over the past couple of decades, Latin American worship music has made celebrities out of singers like Fernandinho and Marcos Witt, the five-time Grammy winner behind Instituto CanZion’s 80 schools in 21 countries. Some of Salamea’s students have found modest success as musicians in dance clubs in the region.

“They are making money,” he says with a smile. But his own congregation needed to be persuaded to invite the young musicians onto their stage.

After Salamea had been giving lessons for about six years, church members started asking why their small staff was giving so much time and energy to people outside the fold. Salamea and Ramirez-Eve resisted charging tuition for the lessons, though Emanuel could have used the money. They believed that if they could show the congregants how the young musicians could enhance their worship, they might gain more support.

But the core of the church was made up of charismatic Presbyterians from Guatemala, and many of the music students were Mexican Catholics. There was some theological tension between the two groups over issues of women in leadership and the gifts of the Spirit. Ramirez-Eve urged the church to offer hospitality and see how people’s theological beliefs might change over time.

Ramirez-Eve and Salamea created a special Wednesday night service to showcase the academy’s budding worship bands. “It was not easy for [the congregation] to open that space on Sundays,” says Ramirez-Eve. Salamea said the Wednesday night service was “the bridge we created in order to bring [students] into the church.”

Eventually, the original core of Guatemalan Presbyterians left the church, but Emanuel’s young musicians have never looked



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back. For worship, three youth bands rotate with the adults in La Banda Vino Nuevo (New Wine) and Emanuel's in-house mariachi band. Over the past couple of years, Emanuel has even begun requiring music students to work toward joining a worship team.

"I'm not as good as my father with using words," said Ramirez, daughter of the pastor. "Through singing I can encourage people and influence people to follow God's word, and worship and let him into their lives. When they see me and my band, since we're pretty young, that we're so touched by the Spirit, and that we love to do this as an everyday kind of thing, it inspires people so that they can really see what God can do."

"I think they see that it works," comments Salamea.

The tempo troubles and Starbucks distractions have slowed down La Banda Revelation's rehearsal. They've only gotten through three of their seven songs for Sunday by the time Duarte deftly starts the polka-like rhythm of "Da Me La Mano" ("Give Me Your Hand"), a Mexican ranchera tune that Emanuel sings every week during the passing of the peace. Bassist Kiara Servin, at 14 the youngest and least experienced member of the band, isn't quite ready for the quick transition.

"Todo esto va junto!" Salamea urges. "De la primera a la fin. Together! Together!" ("All these songs go together, from the beginning to the end").

"It's almost my bedtime," yawns Garcia.

"C'mon, guys," says Ramirez. "Let's hurry!"

Salamea is satisfied they'll get it on the next run-through, so they move on to "Jesus at the Center," a gospel ballad by Israel Houghton, worship leader at Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church in Houston. The singers have been practicing with a recording of the Spanish version—and complaining about it.

"It's so weird to say, 'El centro de todo es Jesús,'" Ramirez says.

"Why don't we just keep it in English?" asks Servin. Garcia concurs.

"No puedes," says Salamea. ("You can't.") Church is a sanctuary for immigrants, one place they can be themselves, in their own language. Salamea is concerned not for the kids' comfort but for their parents.

"It doesn't make sense—the syllables," says Garcia. "Maybe if we had learned it this way first."

"Guillermo, it's 8:10," says Ramirez. "Can we do this song another time? I know you want to do it, but we just learned it."

"It's going to take a lot of time, and we need to practice these other songs," says Garcia, who attends a year-round school. "I have homework."

"Yeah, we have homework," says Servin.

"You're not in school!" says Ramirez, laughing.

It doesn't matter; Salamea is con-

vinced. They will tackle Israel Houghton's song another day. Instead, they plow through "Solo Cristo," by Hillsong Español, and Witt's "Gracias," with Garcia nailing the same sort of low harmony she missed in the earlier song.

Just before nine, the band runs cleanly through their whole set. By Sunday morning, the tempo troubles are no more. Fifty-six-year-old Maria Telles, who used to sing these sorts of dramatic pop songs as a younger Catholic in Mexico, raises both arms as Revelation leads the song "Haz Llover." Telles's posture of reception matches the lyrics: "As the deer pants for water . . . flood my heart."

"I feel like I'm talking to God," she says later as Garcia translates. "I thank God I have the privilege to sing."

Just as they practiced, the band shakes the crowd from the mystical encounter of "Haz Llover" and into community. Led by Duarte's polka beat and Salamea's bouncy, synthesized accordion melody, they play through "Da Me La Mano" several times as the worshipers scurry to greet as many others as they can.

Revelation saves its best for last. As Garcia and Ramirez spit Witt's rapid-fire lyrics over a reggaeton groove, they wave their arms and clap their hands to the elusive rhythm. "Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, let us worship on Mount Zion, the joy of Puerto Rico," they sing in Spanish. "Pon tu mano arriba!" the congregation sings. Put your hand up! And most of them do.

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The book of Esther laughs at empire

Biblical farce

by Debbie Blue

THE BIBLE IS a compilation of stories, poetry, and questionable history about an enigmatic but graceful God. This God seeks relationship with humans—self-important creatures who fluctuate perpetually between grandiosity and shame, mammals who spend an inordinate amount of time and resources trying to convince themselves and others they are something they are not (radiant, godlike, flawless, immortal, innocent).

Surely the whole premise of the book lends itself to humor on occasion. If you hope to reach the heart of this peculiar species, you will probably need a sense of humor. I'm pretty sure it's an essential quality of grace.

The Bible has many funny moments—though you might not know it from the history of Christian interpretation. One of Nietzsche's most penetrating critiques of Christianity was that Christians were a joyless people. Paul Tillich said he almost left the faith for the same reason. Of course, many preachers incorporate humor into their sermons these days, but I think we often miss the notes of irony, sarcasm, or hyperbole in the text itself. Maybe it has to do with some dour asceticism in our history or our DNA.

Rabbinic readings are certainly more playful. The midrashic scholar Avivah Zornberg says that "the Midrash invites us to read the text with the truest—that is, with the least conventional, platitudinous, or even pious—understandings available to us." Christians might heed that invitation. Stephen Moore, a New Testament scholar, says of Christians: "Victorian scruples regulate our reading habits. We need to rendezvous with the texts in the kitchen garden occasionally, away from the cloying niceties of the drawing room." I like this image.

One of the most blatant examples of humor in the Bible is the book of Esther. If you are reading it with your Victorian scruples intact, however, you might miss it or dismiss it.

Calvin didn't include Esther in his biblical commentaries. "I am so great an enemy" to Esther, said Luther, "that I wish it had not come to us at all." He felt it had too much "Judaizing" and "pagan naughtiness."

Thankfully, Luther didn't have the final say. I'm thrilled Esther came to us. It's edgy, funny, and strange. I like that in a holy book. And I like that it is a book about a woman who—without father or brother or husband, without being pure or holy or virginal—stands in the eye of an ego-driven, farcical, man-made, nearly catastrophic storm and acts to save her people from destruction.

Esther is not your typical saint. She doesn't conduct herself like someone who is zealous about the law, yet she becomes a Jewish heroine. She doesn't rise up from unsavory circumstances ringed with white blossoms of purity like St. Agnes, who was thrown into a brothel but remained, miraculously, immaculate. Esther is decidedly not a heroine of the nunnish type.

Esther's comic aspects aren't contained in a few jokes. Humor is the essence of the book. It's a timeless sort of farce, full of men behaving badly. The king of the Persian Empire, according to Esther the greatest the world had ever known, is an ineffectual, pompous buffoon, surrounded by a cadre of advisers who pander to his ego. At the start of the book, he is throwing a preposterously lavish party—it's six months long—culminating in a scene where the drunken king summons his queen to parade in front of his guests wearing nothing but her crown. She refuses to concede to this (rock on, Queen Vashti). He banishes her in a fit of rage, but soon he is petulant and lonely.

His advisers suggest that perhaps a harem of the most beautiful young virgins might brighten things up a bit. They will gather them from far and wide. Each night a different virgin will come in to him, and whichever one he likes best will be the new queen. This does mitigate the king's rage. Before the young women can enter his chamber, however, they must undergo a beautifying regime, supervised by eunuchs—an entire year of sloughing and moisturizing and having any natural fragrance perfumed away. Esther, a Jewish orphan raised by her uncle, Mordecai, turns out to be the virgin who pleases the king the most. So she becomes queen.

The whole thing would be infuriating if it wasn't so over the top. The book of Esther is poking fun at the Persian elite, mocking the decadence of empire and the absurdity of human pretensions. There is a shorter Greek version of Esther—distinct from both the Hebrew Masoretic Text and the Greek Septuagint—that has a totally different vibe. There's no comedy; the narrator delivers his grave lesson in a serious tone. But the Hebrew version is meant to get you laughing—at kings, goyish pomposity, absurd egos.

Haman is a comic villain, a prince in the king's court who is

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elevated to a place of importance for no particular reason but who takes his unfounded fame very seriously. There is a slapstick quality to Haman's self-importance. When Mordecai won't bow down to him, he responds by convincing the king to annihilate every Jew, young and old, on the day for which he drew lots. It makes no sense that the king casually agrees to this. The whole situation is ludicrous.

Concerned for the fate of his people, Mordecai asks Esther to talk to the king. She is reluctant, because if you go into the king's chamber without being summoned, you are put to death. The only chance you have is if the king holds out his "golden scepter" toward you. Esther says the king hasn't summoned her to his chamber for a whole month, so the golden scepter may not be likely to point in her direction. The euphemistic nature of the scepter is pretty obvious, and the bawdy humor sets a comic rather than tragic tone.

Mordecai convinces Esther to give it a try—not by offering her an infallible directive from God, but by posing a question: Who knows? Maybe you're in this place at this time for a rea-

The bawdy humor sets a comic rather than tragic tone.

son. God is not flashy or obvious in the book of Esther. In fact, in the Hebrew text God is not mentioned at all. Nothing is certain, ambiguity prevails, but Esther decides to act to divert the coming disaster. She decides, "If I perish, I perish."

Esther goes to the king's chamber. The golden scepter points in her direction. In fact, she pleases the king so immensely that he says he will do anything she asks. She asks him to come to dinner and bring Haman along. They drink wine. The king is happy. He tells Esther to ask whatever she wants of him. She asks him to come to dinner with Haman again the next evening. Haman goes home and regales his household with stories of his great success in court, his general splendor and riches—how he and only he has been invited to dine with Esther and the king.

At dinner the next evening, Esther tells the king of the terrible plan to be carried out against her people. He seems astonished, though he played a pretty big role in it himself, and asks, who is the man? Esther points to Haman, "a foe, the enemy!" The king orders Haman to be hanged on the preposterously large gallows he had been constructing for Mordecai—as high as a six-story building.

On the day the Jews were to be slaughtered, they defend themselves (perhaps a tad too robustly). Mordecai makes a decree that from now on, on the 14th day of the month of Adar, the Jewish people will celebrate with feasting and holiday making. They will send good food to one another and give to the poor. They will celebrate this way on the day on which the Jews got relief from their sadness, when their sorrow was turned into laughter, and the feast day shall be called after the *pur* (the lots) that Haman cast.

And so it has been to this day, over the centuries quite mer-

ily. In the spirit of the book of Esther, Purim is a funny sort of holiday. Esther is read aloud in the synagogue, and whenever Haman's name is mentioned (which is 54 times) children rattle special noisemakers made for the occasion. Some people write Haman's name on the bottom of their shoe and stamp their feet to blot out his name, as instructed by the ancient rabbis, who do have a sense of humor.

There are special foods for this feast—little triangular pastries filled with poppy seeds, chocolate, or apricot called *hamantaschen* (Haman's pockets) or *oznei Haman* (Haman's ears). A special loaf of bread, baked in the shape of Haman's head, is called "the eyes of Haman." The eyes are made of boiled eggs.

One of the most important obligations of the feast day is to eat a festive meal (I love an obligation like that) and not only to eat but to drink wine, lots of it. The sages of the ancient Talmud said that people should drink so much wine on Purim that they can no longer distinguish between the phrases "cursed is Haman" and "blessed is Mordecai." Later some rabbis said that maybe you should drink only a little more than usual after all—but still, you are obliged to drink, laugh, and have fun.

People dress up in costumes as a way of emulating God, whose presence was disguised but who was nevertheless among them, quietly, hidden—maybe a bit hard to glimpse, but underneath holding all things.

We need to be able to laugh at ourselves, our species. Maybe we wouldn't be so destructive if we didn't take ourselves so seriously. Of course, there are times to be dead serious, but laughing at kings is a way to not give the powerful the power they so pompously claim.

While Esther is an obvious example of comedy in the Bible, I'm pretty sure there are others that we miss. Jesus uses hyperbole, sarcasm, and irony. He's a mensch with chutzpah, not a tepid kind of saint. I sometimes wonder if Jesus was joking when he called Peter the rock on which the church is built. The rock sinks when it believes it can walk on water; it crumbles in betrayal at a crucial moment. There's tragedy in this, of course—but perhaps a bit of humor, too.

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by Stephanie Paulsell

Fluent in God's work

A FEW WEEKS after moving to Rome, my daughter returned from dinner with classmates and announced that sharing a meal with people from around the world and trying to communicate in each other's languages was life's greatest pleasure. "I want my life to be full of meals like these," she said.

I'm learning a lot from watching my daughter navigate in multiple languages this year. "Ah, the young," a shopkeeper told me as he witnessed how much more at ease my daughter is in Italian than I am. "Their brains are so fresh!"

I recently signed up for an Italian class to try to catch up with her, and it's clear that a fresh brain would be a definite advantage. But there are other qualities needed. Most necessary is a blend of humility and fearlessness, a willingness to risk embarrassment and failure over and over again. The star students of language classrooms are the ones most comfortable making mistakes and most eager to be corrected. They are also having the most fun. One of my classmates, a young priest from the Republic of the Congo who is learning his fifth language, advised me to listen to more Italian music and watch more Italian films. "You have to find pleasure in a language," he told me, "in order for the logic of the language to reveal itself."

Also important is the capacity to remain open and attentive even as meaning slips in and out of our grasp. Learning to understand what someone is saying in another language requires us to bring our minds continually back to the speaker and focus our attention on something outside ourselves. It's a lot like learning to pray.

Then there's the willingness to let go of our accustomed ways of finding meaning with words. My daughter suggested that I stop trying to translate every word into English in my mind. "You've got to let go of English," she told me. "You've got to learn to hear in Italian as well. It's not just English expressed another way. You've got to think differently."

In Rome, language learning feels like a Christian obligation. When Pope Francis opened the Jubilee Year of Mercy a few weeks ago, prayers were offered in Mandarin, Arabic, French, Swahili, and Malayalam. The first lesson was read in Spanish, the second in English, and the gospel in Italian. The Lord's Prayer and the creed were sung in Latin. It's hard to imagine anyone present understanding everything—at some point in the service everyone would have heard the sound of longing, prayer, and praise in an unfamiliar language. The music of those languages made me wonder what new thing I might learn about my own faith if I could understand.

The book of Genesis tells a story about a time when "the whole earth had one language and the same words." But when earth's monoglots began to build a tower to heaven, God divided their one language into many and scattered the people across the face of the earth. A homogenous group piling brick upon brick seems not to be what God had in mind for human beings.

The old desire to build structures that enshrine a single language, a single perspective, is as strong as ever. As unprecedented numbers of refugees flee the most extreme kinds of violence, Donald Trump proposes building a wall at the U.S.-Mexican border and looks back nostalgically at our nation's history of internment camps. As Mohamedou Ould Slahi reports in his *Guantánamo Diary*, prisoners held without charge at Guantánamo Bay have been told that speaking multiple languages is a suspicious gift, one of the "criteria of a top terrorist."

In fact, speaking multiple languages is the mark of a person of faith. On the day of Pentecost, with help from the Holy Spirit, Christ's disciples addressed "Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt . . . Libya . . . [and] Rome," each in their own language. From the tower of Babel to Pentecost, the stories of our faith remind us both of God's love of languages in all their diversity and of our call, as God's people, to learn to communicate across all kinds of boundaries.

Churches have often embraced language teaching as a form of welcome. My mother taught English to refugees from Haiti when I was a child, and my daughter teaches English to refugees from Afghanistan and Liberia. Both were invited into this work by churches for whom it was a ministry.

In these days, both teaching and learning a language can be an act of resistance to walls and prisons and the torture done in our name. What if more churches became known as places where languages were not only taught to those newly arrived in our communities but also learned by those of us who've been here for a while? What if we were more deliberate about lifting up the languages present in our congregations, our country, and our world? Perhaps we'd enter more fully into God's work of retraining the human imagination in openness and attention, humility, and fearlessness, moving us away from our towers and out into the world.

Stephanie Paulsell teaches at Harvard Divinity School.

IN Review

Inside the other side

by Walter Brueggemann

Violence seems to have permeated every dimension of our common life and every dimension of our imagination, and political leaders are putting it to political use, mobilizing fear and thus skewing policy and practice. Theological teachers and preachers must respond credibly to this public reality. Jonathan Sacks, the former chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth, has made a wise and important response.

Sacks begins his book with a large-scale analysis of public violence and its roots. He observes that in the 17th century the rise of Enlightenment rationality and its attendant ethos of tolerance, which transcended national sectarianism, permitted the promulgation of the Treaty of Westphalia. Thus a rough peace was guaranteed by secularization. More recently, however, that secularization has diminished in authority, so "religious violence" has been able to reemerge with immense energy.

But so-called religious violence is not rooted in religion, and religion has nothing to do with generating it. Rather, Sacks suggests, the source of violence is found in a dualism that separates "us" from "them," in Manichaean fashion, and that freely treats "them" with hostility and hatred.

Such a dualism occurs in three steps. First, the adversary—them—is dehumanized and demonized. Second, we come to regard ourselves as victims of them. Third, victimization creates a warrant for doing "altruistic evil"—that is, the elimination of them becomes a great good. Once this ideological reduction is set in motion, it can surface in main-

stream monotheism as readily as it can anywhere else.

Sacks is rightly insistent that the Jewish interpretive tradition, followed by the catholic tradition of Christianity, powerfully refuses every such dualism. In an appeal to Isaiah 45:7, he witnesses to the God who "creates weal and woe" and thereby refuses all "splitting" that can turn violence into a religious or patriotic virtue.

The heart of Sacks's powerful argument in the second part of his book consists of a compelling exposition of Genesis. He judges that pervasive violence is deeply rooted in the sibling narratives of Genesis that have set brother against brother, one preferred and one rejected—preferences and rejections that have been variously taken up by Jews, Christians, and Muslims with respect to Isaac and Ishmael and Esau and Jacob. Sacks contends that surface readings of these narratives, which set brother against brother and so feed ongoing hostility, are misreadings.

Sacks suggests an astonishing rereading of the narratives that appeals to the long tradition of rabbinic exegesis. His reading of Isaac and Ishmael is a counternarrative in which the chosenness of Isaac does not displace Ishmael. The rabbis understood that Abraham continued to love Ishmael and to care for him.

In a second case, he recognizes that by the end of the complex narrative of Esau and Jacob the two brothers have reversed roles. As a result, Jacob receives a second blessing, which is no longer about wealth and power, but rather a blessing of covenant.

Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence

By Jonathan Sacks
Schocken, 320 pp., \$28.95

Sacks's third and most compelling exposition is of the Joseph narrative. Joseph, regally empowered in Egypt, toys with his brothers, frightening them with the threat of slavery. As a result, those who had sold Joseph into slavery years before come to "know from the inside what it feels like to be on the other side." Sacks opines that this role reversal is "an education in otherness" so that the brothers can learn empathy. I have elsewhere proposed that the lament Psalms that address God in the petitionary imperative practice a "provisional role reversal" so the psalmist can "command" and God is summoned to obey.

Such role reversal, as I have seen it in the Psalms and as Sacks discerns it here, is counterintuitive; it breaks up all conventional assumptions of entitlement, certitude, and privilege by entering into the pain and suffering of the other. This insight from Sacks is crucial for us. It gives us textual ground to stand on against the hysteria of violence that is rooted in tacit notions of chosenness and exceptionalism. Such shrewd exposition requires us to closely read and seriously study the texts in order to see in them more than surface accounts of self-congratulation for privileged status.

As far as I can tell, Sacks cites

Walter Brueggemann is the author of *Sabbath as Resistance* (Westminster John Knox).



Emmanuel Levinas only once in the book, but his presence hovers everywhere, with his recognition that the “face of the other” offers the truth of our life. For Sacks it is serious engagement with the other, like Joseph’s with his brothers, that may counter the violence arising from a simplistic and surface reading of the other’s life.

The third section of the book contains more general comments that are interesting and credible, but not particularly helpful to the argument. Sacks emphasizes two points. First, all texts require interpretation and are subject to new readings. He offers valuable examples of how, from time to time, rabbis are determined to declare that old readings are simply “inoperative.” This is a rich suggestion, for many old Christian readings could readily be declared inoperative. Second, when religion is allied with power, it is always toxic. Religion is both effective and true to itself when it has no power and seeks no power.

This book is a wondrous and valuable probe of our current world of violence. It invites us to rethink and to rehear the founding texts that are invoked to fund crusades. An important quibble I have with the book, however, is that a quiet but determined apologetic runs through it in which Christian violence is often cited, but Islamic violence is everywhere exposed. And Jews are most often cited as those who have suffered violence. Of course, there are ample grounds for that. But Sacks misses many opportunities to notice Palestinian suffering that is rooted in religious claims and in Jewish-Israeli violence toward Palestinians. He has no word to speak on the subject. If he chose to speak on it, he could do so with great and summoning authority.

In spite of that disappointment, this book presents a most welcome and compelling argument. It speaks against every reduction of Christian faith to excessive patriotism and its attendant militarism. It points authoritatively toward an alternative practice of public life grounded in a common humanity that subverts all tribal temptations.

The Hungry Mind: The Origins of Curiosity in Childhood

By Susan Engel

Harvard University Press, 232 pp., \$35.00

Children’s curiosity is both a curse and a necessity for religious leaders. What pastor or church school teacher hasn’t cringed when a well-planned children’s lesson goes off on a tangent because of children’s questions? Yet children learn to wonder precisely by asking questions and receiving answers, says Susan Engel, and wondering is an essential disposition for Christian discipleship.

Engel, a developmental psychologist, has spent over a decade studying the origins of children’s curiosity and the relationship between educational systems that teach to the test and a notable decline in children’s expressions of curiosity.

She is particularly interested in “epistemic curiosity,” which she defines as “the urge to know about things that have no obvious or utilitarian function.” Epistemic curiosity is what leads children to the wonder about God and unseen things that constitutes a spiritual life. Engel offers an understanding of what curiosity is and, indirectly, ideas for encouraging curiosity through conversations, classroom activities, and an ethos of congregational inquiry.

The Hungry Mind weaves together stories from Engel’s childhood, data from studies conducted by Engel and others, and scripts from parent-child and student-teacher conversations. Engel uses these elements to identify personal and social circumstances that contribute to the development of curiosity: “emotional daring or openness,” conversations with trusted adults that encourage questioning, adult models of intellectual exploration, opportunities to speculate, encounters with novel and complex ideas, exposure to stories and gossip, the means to forage for information, solitude, and time to explore independently.

Engel’s description of a Japanese

Reviewed by Karen-Marie Yust, professor of Christian education at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Virginia.



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teacher who provokes curiosity in her students by coming to class with a paper bag full of surprise items relevant to the day's lesson is reminiscent of the "paper bag sermon" approach some pastors use with children in worship. Her claim that children's curiosity is sparked when they have "natural, complicated, and messy places to play" calls to mind the elaborate fantasies developed by my children and their friends in a desolate corner of the schoolyard dubbed "Martianland" by several generations of students. Her description of educational systems that seem to lack the goal of helping children pose questions also rings true for many church school curricula, in which questions are scripted and children are expected to offer predetermined answers to keep the lesson moving in the proper direction.

One of Engel's most helpful observations is that "curiosity episodes" occur both within planned activities and around the margins of formal instruction. Nurturing spiritual curiosity is not solely a matter finding a good curricu-

lum. For children's curiosity to grow, teachers should be oriented to the value of informal learning and given permission to go off topic when children's questions lead away from the lesson but toward another fruitful path to God. Engel found that teachers who offered small suggestions and "smiled and talked in an encouraging manner" reinforced children's curiosity more than teachers who simply asked questions and then supplied children with the right answers.

I experienced the truth of this observation while teaching a group of five- to seven-year-olds the Bible story of the paralyzed man lowered through the roof. One of the children asked, "Was it hard to get the man up to the roof?" I laid down on the floor and suggested that they try to carry me across the room. As they struggled to lift me, and then to lift one another, they shouted, "This is hard work!" and "Wow! His friends *really* wanted to help him get well!" This impromptu activity was not in the lesson plan, but it did more to help children

explore the story curiously than anything else we did that Sunday morning.

One area of Engel's research requires careful unpacking if it is to be useful in a religious setting: the idea that gossip is a positive means of nurturing curiosity. She describes gossip as a form of social glue that helps people bond around shared norms. While acknowledging that stories about others can be used as "social weapons," she contends that children's curiosity about other people is piqued by "negative anecdotes" in ways that encourage them to acquire necessary information about the world. Many Bible stories—for example, those about David and Bathsheba, Peter denying Jesus, and Mary anointing Jesus' feet—use negative information to draw readers into the drama associated with being human in a broken world. These stories fall within Engel's category of gossip. As children explore such stories, their curiosity about the messy details may lend credence to the moral messages attached to these narratives.

Teachers, especially those working in public schools, may resist the negative portrayal of the teaching profession in the chapters titled "Curiosity Goes to School" and "What Fuels Learning." Although Engel acknowledges the problematic influence of federal and state mandates on classroom culture, she is quick to condemn teachers as the primary agents responsible for quelling curiosity in school-age children.

A more helpful critique would focus on the inappropriate expectations of a society that delegates primary responsibility for children's holistic and spiritual development to low-paid and volunteer workers without providing sufficient resources, continuing education, and communal support. The attrition of curiosity in children calls not for finger-pointing, but for strong collaborative efforts to reclaim the wonder of childhood as an asset at home, at school, and in congregations.



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After We Die: Theology, Philosophy, and the Question of Life After Death

By Stephen T. Davis

Baylor University Press, 175 pp., \$34.95

The Nicene Creed, embraced by virtually all Christian churches, concludes: "I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come." Resurrection and eternal life are not just one item on a list of Christian beliefs, they constitute the whole point of being a Christian. But, Stephen Davis observes in *After We Die*, the reality of resurrection and eternal life cannot be proved by experience. Reports about heaven from near-death experiences won't do because, after all, the people doing the reporting didn't die. So belief in eternal life is just that: a belief.

Whether that belief is plausible or preposterous, the first question to ask is, What does it mean? Philosopher

Antony Flew argued long ago that the very idea of afterlife has no meaning; it is like a round square, self-contradictory. Afterlife implies that I could somehow attend my own funeral, which is absurd.

Davis quickly dismisses Flew by noting that language is fluid: surviving death is not, after all, like surviving a car crash. Resurrection is not resuscitation. But if we extend the meaning of *survive* to an afterlife, what survives? Resurrected life comes only after the radical termination of life, this life, my life. My body is, once and for all, dead and done with.

A common answer within Christianity and other religious traditions is that the soul or mind survives. Even in ordinary life, the soul or mind is regarded as separate from the body. Despite the best efforts of neurologically entranced philosophers to claim that the mind is just the brain, thoughts intend something that neural events do not. My soul can be recognized as my person. Though I may express my person in bodily gestures, my body is not my person. The critical issue,

then, is not the fact of the separation of the mind or soul from the body; it is whether that separation is—to use Davis's labels—a difference of substance or property.

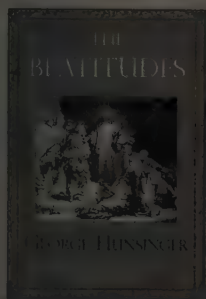
We have a range of property expressions for the doings of the mind or soul that are not at all proper for the body. My body does not read Kant, and I do not digest Kant's *Critique* as a cannibal might Immanuel himself. Davis holds that property differences are finally based on substantial difference. Mind, soul, or something similar is essential to any logically coherent description of an afterlife. Some *thing* must exist beyond bodily death.

If one admits that the soul or mind exists in a substantial sense separate from the body and can survive death, does a disembodied mind or soul qualify

Reviewed by Dennis O'Brien of Middlebury, Vermont, who is the author of *The Church and Abortion: A Catholic Dissent* (Rowman & Littlefield).

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as a person? If my mind lives on, is that me? Descartes's famous *Cogito ergo sum*—I think, therefore I am—reduced human reality to a *res cogitans*, a thinking thing, but just thinking hardly seems to capture the idea of my person, in this life or the next.

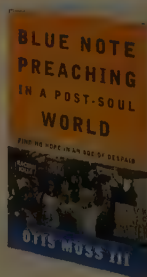
Some Eastern religions posit an immortal substance beyond bodily existence but not personal salvation; the soul ultimately merges with Being or the world soul and loses individuality. Christianity promises personal salvation. But can a bodiless soul count as a person? Living persons have passions and pleasures, appetites and needs that bodiless souls apparently lack, thus the Christian belief in bodily resurrection seems to be a necessary condition for personal salvation—or ultimate perdition. Bodily resurrection recognizes the rooting of a person in bodily existence. The resurrected body may be, as Paul says, a "glorified" body, but it is a body.

Regarding the complicated theological debate about the relation of the res-

urrected body to the long-ago dead and decomposed body, Davis discusses two theological traditions: the patristic and the modern. The patristic tradition argued that, one way or another, the resurrected body must be materially the same as the body that died. Otherwise my resurrected body will not be me, but only a replica of me. Aquinas stated the problem: "If the body of the man who rises is not to be composed of the flesh and bones which now compose it, the man who rises will not be the same man." The church fathers worried about how resurrection would be managed if I were eaten by a cannibal. Who gets the material parts? Modern theories reject the demand for material continuity; the disembodied soul is a sufficient vehicle for personal continuity. Davis tends to agree with that view and relies on God's creative power to solve the problem of material continuity.

After We Die demonstrates that even the most minimal attempt to explain resurrection runs into logical snares and

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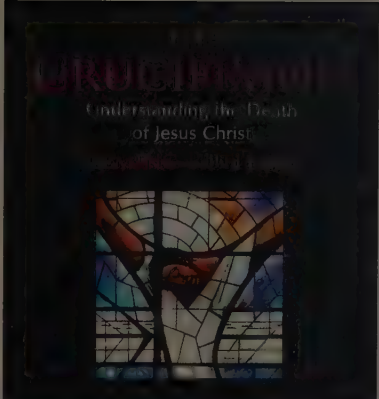
theological conundrums. Davis is scrupulous about noting difficulties and ingenious in offering possible solutions. I heartily commend his efforts to any preacher or teacher called upon to explain resurrection. Still, I think Davis's work relies on a view of philosophy and a school of biblical theology that unwittingly limit the understanding of religious faith.

Davis characterizes his work as Christian philosophical theology, or analytical theology. His version of analysis is in the mainstream of academic philosophy, with a focus on the truth claims of assertions. Thus Davis starts by showing that assertion of a life after death, rightly understood, is a genuine truth claim, not a disguised piece of nonsense. So assured, one can then offer truth conditions for the idea of a separate soul and so on.

Davis's theological references and citations are largely from contemporary scholars within the tradition of what I

would call biblical plain-speech. When the New Testament says that Jesus rose from the dead, it means that the person who preached in Palestine and died on a Roman cross lived after death. He did not rise metaphorically into the kerygma of the apostles. If both Jesus' resurrection and mine can be expressed in a plain-speech truth claim, then Davis's analytic efforts are highly important.

The problem with demonstrating how biblical statements can make logical and factual sense is that it may involve bypassing how the Bible makes religious sense. To take a different view of the philosophical task: Wittgenstein rejected the type of analysis Davis practices because it fails to appreciate the varied ways in which language is actually used. We play many very different games with language. Davis concentrates on the game of making truth claims. Wittgenstein argues that the truth function game, however successful, fails to reach the religious game.



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Consider Wittgenstein on the Last Judgment. "Suppose . . . we knew people who foresaw the future . . . and they described some sort of Judgement. Queerly enough, even if there were such a thing, . . . belief in the happening would not be at all a religious belief." For Wittgenstein, belief in a Last Judgment is not a factual belief, it is an ultimate life decision. "Why shouldn't one form of life culminate in an utterance of belief in a Last Judgement." The idea of a Last Judgment is "a certain picture . . . constantly admonishing me; . . . the picture is constantly in the foreground." Religious belief in a Last Judgment expresses a steadfast decision that life exists under an inescapable moral imperative. How that might be factually described in terms of souls, bodies, and resurrection is not so important.

As Wittgenstein says in another passage, "Only love can believe the Resurrection." Sometimes, the more we explain love, the more we undermine its reality.

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Redeeming the Great Emancipator

By Allen C. Guelzo
Harvard University Press, 208 pp., \$22.95

Although it is anachronistic to put it this way, the subtext of this reappraisal of Lincoln as the Great Emancipator is the question, "Do black lives matter?" That question put to Lincoln doesn't yield a simple question. While Lincoln came to see slavery as a great blemish on the American soul, and he was the first president to invite African Americans to the White House for a consultation about the future of blacks in America, Lincoln nevertheless lacked racial empathy. Moreover, as Guelzo puts it, "slavery, for Lincoln, was a political and economic problem before it was a racial one." The redemption suggested by the title would rescue Lincoln from those who uncritically celebrate Lincoln's role in granting greater equality to blacks and those who demean it.

Teaching Plato in Palestine: Philosophy in a Divided World

By Carlos Fraenkel
Princeton University Press, 240 pp., \$27.95

Fraenkel taught philosophy to Palestinian youth, Muslims in Indonesia, Hasidic Jews in New York, teens in Brazil, and indigenous people in Canada. These locations were chosen deliberately to engage issues of ideological conflict and social and racial division, and the struggles of indigenous peoples with colonialism. Engaging minds across cultural divides gave rise to questions that philosophy traditionally has addressed: Does God exist? Does piety matter? Can violence ever be justified? What is social justice, and how can it be realized? Who should rule, and what does self-determination require? Based on his experience, Fraenkel developed what he calls a culture of debate, which encourages the joint seeking of truth rather than attempts to win an argument.

Redeeming *Star Wars*

What was the point of that movie?" my son asked me as the credits rolled on *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. He didn't ask with hostility. He knew what he'd seen was about more than what he'd seen.

Star Wars has always been about fathers and sons, good and evil, friendship and courage. But *The Force Awakens* has the added burden of righting an entire franchise.

George Lucas's original film trilogy (1977–1983) told the same story in several different ways. A young man in a desolate place longs for adventure, gets more than he bargains for, and with the help of a few friends, delivers the galaxy from evil. It was Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* combined with the best technology that the 1970s and early '80s had to offer. The result was a masterful, intricately woven story.

In a response to a positive CENTURY review of the original *Star Wars* (July 20–27, 1977), one reader panned the movie as an example of the kind of simple moral narrative that was ruining America. To show clear evil, pitted against the clear, unadulterated good that wins in the end fueled a Manichaean form of American patriotism. America imagined as itself the good guy doing battle against the bad guy. But this reader missed the grit in the story, the longing for a more expansive life, and the romance of trying to do good with nothing but a few comrades, a bucket of bolts, and a crazy old religion.

Lucas's subsequent prequel trilogy (1999–2005) did not have the same magic. But when Disney bought the franchise and signed young director J. J.

Abrams to write and direct the next trilogy, anticipation was high.

The Force Awakens does not disappoint; it has everything the prequel trilogy did not. The original cast arrives with suitably grand entrances (the audience I was part of cheered each character's arrival), and they're given things to do that they never did before. The young hotshots of the early films are now elders mulling over failure and loss, trying to figure out how to make things right. Han Solo (Harrison Ford) and Leia Organa (Carrie Fisher) have, like the disciples in John 21, gone back to their old ways of life. Their marriage didn't work; their children are troubled. Anybody who has lived a little since 1983 can relate. When the galaxy's new heroine, Rey (Daisy Ridley), hands a blue lightsaber to a member of the original cast, the message is clear. A new generation saves an old one; the child redeems the parent.

Abrams is like the kid down the block who has every action figure and toy and invites you to play. How about a super Death Star that can destroy multiple planets at once? How about a cantina with a Yoda-like character in it, or a storm trooper with a conscience who can fight with a lightsaber? Abrams has "geeked out" over the original and relaunched it with new vision and energy. It's how we should preach.

Star Wars is now a multicultural universe: the action heroes aren't just boys and the stars aren't only white. Abrams has Lucas's knack for the shocker, but also a knack for leaving bread crumbs that lead to nothing and prepare you for plot points that suddenly dart off elsewhere. *The Force Awakens* is a space



SPACE OPERA: *The Force Awakens* was charged with redeeming a franchise.

opera that Disney will use to sell toys for decades, but it is also more fun than grownups are normally allowed to have.

Much fan speculation centered on when and where Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) would appear. The scene in which he finally enters was filmed on the island of Skellig Michael, where Irish monks prayed in seclusion for centuries. Skywalker wears his monk-like Jedi robe, and in his face shows every one of his 32 years since *Return of the Jedi*, revealing resignation, regret, fear, and hope all at once. Can he train a new Jedi as he was trained? Will his gifts contribute to more good or more evil in the world?

The CENTURY's letter writer was right: Lucas's *Star Wars* had some Manichaeanism in it. Abrams's vision has less. Evil seeks reassurance. Good is less confident in itself. We can see Augustine, alongside Mani, in this film: he always imagined that redemption would reveal the Fall to have been a "happy fault." It's a risky teaching.

Can we say that the failed prequels were a happy fault to have brought about so great a restoration as *The Force Awakens*?

Redemption, son, the story is about redemption.

The author is Jason Byassee, who teaches homiletics and hermeneutics at the Vancouver School of Theology.



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by Philip Jenkins

The saint of Karachi

Media often report on the grim plight of Pakistan's Christians, who make up just 1.5 percent of the country's 200 million people. Long subject to mob attacks and discriminatory prosecutions, their situation has deteriorated in recent years with the rise of extreme Islamist factions.

Anyone looking for a serious or morally improving analysis of this story should absolutely not turn to Mohammed Hanif's 2012 novel *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*. But if you want a stunning exploration of very poor minority Christians living in a tumultuous and endemically violent setting, you could choose no better.

Our Lady of Alice Bhatti follows in the Swiftian satiri-

effective use of a razor blade. As she declares, "What use was your faith if it didn't give you the strength and skills to break a few bones?" The theme of the book is how this all-too-worldly woman was recognized as a miracle-working saint, glimpsed in visions.

The novel works wonderfully as a whole, but much of the interest comes from the incidental pictures of Pakistan religious life. The Christian community is shown, for instance, as deeply divided in class terms. A few old elite families, like the hospital founders, hang on grimly, but the institution has to conceal signs of Christian identity:

"sewer?" Even so, God's presence was "as pervasive as the stench from the open sewers."

Christians survive by doing the dirtiest and least desirable jobs. They are the street sweepers and the menial workers on graveyard shifts. Their dirty jobs reduce them to the lowest caste—*Choohras* (Churas, or Bhangis), which has become the pejorative name for all Christians. Like most of her neighbors, Alice is painfully thin, coming as she does "from the kind of household where starvation is passed off as fasting. . . . Where *dhal* and rice is a Sunday special, and every fourth Sunday of the month is compulsory

version to Islam. Nor will she migrate to those dreamed-of utopias, Dubai or Toronto. She will not follow Yassoo the visa officer. Instead, she imitates her father, who "had always maintained the swagger of a Choohra, an untouchable with attitude, not the demeanor of a washed, devout Sunday Catholic." He sometimes visualizes Jesus as "a janitor who went around cleaning their streets, then sat in a corner drinking his Choohra chai [tea] from his Choohra cup until the day he quietly died and ascended to a Choohra heaven." No true Bhatti will abandon this Jesus, a fellow Choohra.

The novel presents a potent description of Alice's faith and her passionate and all-consuming love for Lord Yassoo. "She didn't just believe in the Holy Spirit, she possessed it and didn't believe in sharing." The magnificent accounts of Alice's "demented devotion" demand quoting at far greater length than I have space for.

Her prayers work, to the point of (apparently) performing miracles and raising people from the dead. But she is modest, always declaring, "It's Him who cures. I just stitch up what has been cut open by life." This is a brilliant, grotesque, and riotously funny book. It is also a moving account of a rough-hewn sanctity.

A Pakistani novel shows Christians as an underclass, doing the least desirable jobs.

cal tradition. The world it depicts is raucous, anarchic, and (often) sexually explicit, marked by stratospheric levels of violence of all kinds, especially against women. Hanif's maniacally comic tone barely conceals his seething rage at the sexual oppression he witnesses around him.

Alice is a Catholic nurse at Karachi's Sacred Heart Hospital for All Ailments. Recently released from prison, she is anything but a plaster saint. Nor is turning the other cheek her strong suit. She deploys a bicycle chain to defend herself against an Islamist mob and stops an attempted rape by

"Leave your firearms and faith at the gate," declares a sign under a neglected wooden cross, left unpainted "in the hope that people will forget that it's a Catholic establishment."

In Karachi, a few thousand Christians (mainly Catholics) cling on in the desperate ghetto of French Colony. When a Pentecostal preacher from Oklahoma leads a revival crusade in the area, Alice wonders: "How about real miracles, like the drains shall remain unclogged? Or the hungry shall be fed? Or our beloved French Colony shall stop smelling like a

Lent. In these households, even empty stomachs gurgle *Yassoo* [Jesus] *be praised*."

As an underclass, Christians survive between the cracks, exploiting every shady opportunity to stay alive in the dominant society. Alice's father makes his living as a magical healer, using Qur'anic-derived spells to cure the stomach ailments of gullible Muslim customers.

Living in hellish conditions, Alice is determined not to give up her faith or to accept the huge improvement in her life that would come with con-

Philip Jenkins's Notes from the Global Church appears in every other issue.

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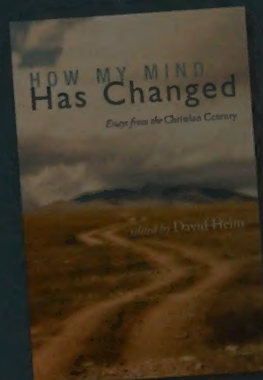
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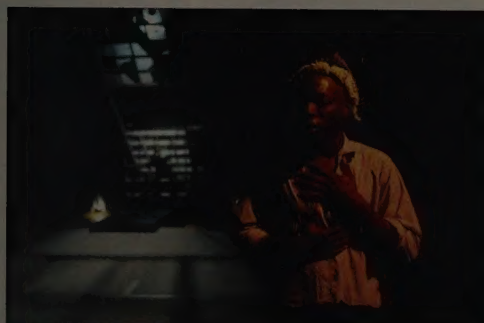
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Judson Arts Wednesdays at Judson Memorial Church, New York City

Judson Memorial Church in Manhattan has a long history of commitment to the arts, and every Wednesday it opens its doors to artists, declaring: “Art can be prophetic. Art can be useless. Art can be sacred. Art can be irreverent. Art can be cheap. Art can be enough.” The heart of the Arts Wednesdays program is associate minister Micah Bucey, who encourages theater, storytelling, and music with what he calls a “theology of curiosity.” The website declares: “No proselytizing, no cover charge; just free food, free art, and open space. We believe that, just as food sustains the body, art sustains the soul. We also believe that artists have the potential to change us by serving as our modern day prophets; they show us where we’ve been, they show us who we are, and they show us what we could become. We don’t take ourselves, the food, or the art too seriously, and that’s how it all thrives.”

Art selection and comment by Lil Copan, a painter and editor.

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Wednesday: Common characteristics of new communities

Thursday: The needs of a new generation

Friday: What existing churches and new communities
can learn from each other